



Beauty of the Beast #3 Rise Of The Serviatrixes: Part B For One To Rise, Two Must Fall

Chapter One

One Falls, Two Rise

Sometime before the Shadow attacked and moments after the False One left Sabrina's DraKa...

Ferlis, the male Femor, approached Sabrina and questioned her, "You have some sort of plan, don't you? You look as if you have finally come up with a plan to ensure that you become the Serviatrix." Sabrina smiled and said, "For one to rise, two must fall. I was just thinking while the False One was here... what if Tabitha should die? Who would they blame?" Ferlis knew where she was going with her inquiry, and he answered, "Wherever the evidence pointed. How will you blame the False One for Tabitha's death?" "I haven't figured out that detail just yet," Sabrina told him as the DraKa Convoy moved through the forest. "Maybe you can help me with that." "I will observe the False One and see what sort of detail can be planted against her once you have killed the highborn, Tabitha." Macht, the Dreadgon companion, spoke, "Sabrina, the False One has stopped the convoy and has gone on ahead. She is alone." "Do you know what is going on?" Sabrina questioned as she leapt on top of the material that shaded the Howdah. "I do not," he replied. "She shouted some orders and then everyone reacted." "The False One and servitor Tabitha shouted orders and everyone reacted?" Sabrina repeated a bit shocked to hear she had such command. "Why would they do such a thing? I thought... no matter what I thought. See if you can find out what is going on." Macht moved forward as she jumped down and joined her companions. Sabrina turned to Ferlis and said, "Maybe I should also worry about the False One. She may have more power than I thought. Your plan to blame her for Tabitha's death would still work to eliminate her. I heard she is actually of Man and nearly all the Necroms hate her." "I have also heard such a rumor, but we should find out if it is true or not. If it is true, she is as despised as we are..." Sabrina then muttered, "...and she bares father's shame." She thought about it some more and stated, "No matter... The False One is still someone I must eliminate." Macht returned and said, "They have ordered that all the DraKas form a circle with their heads facing in. The False One claims that the Shadow are about to attack." "The Shadow!" Sabrina uttered as her DraKa turned. She once again leapt on top of the cloth that shaded the Howdah and peered in the direction where Pluck stood. Sabrina unsheathed her short swords named Twin Adamantems, and they glowed blue like the clearest diamond. She moved her body to jump down as she declared, "We must kill them!" "Wait," Ferlis spoke. "Let the False One face the Shadow alone and perhaps the Shadow will take care of one of your rivals for you." Sabrina relaxed back as she said, "You are right. None of my family is currently in danger. Let this False One face the Shadow alone."

Tabitha's DraKa...

Tabitha watched Alba leave and rush forward to face the Shadow on her own, and it gave Tabitha a sense of guilt, shame, and worry to see Alba go off to face a foe she herself should be facing as the true Serviatrix. Tabitha paced the DraKa as Gamemnon and GuideMa watched Alba in the distance. "Should I move closer and observe the Woman?" GuideMa questioned her duke as she petted the male Calico Winsome Kit that Pluck gave her charge over. "No," Gamemnon replied

to see how the female Femor would react. "You can observe her from here." GuideMa nodded and went and took a position she could better watch the Woman from. He wasn't sure what sort of reaction his Aviatrix had just given him, but he would carefully observe her. Tabitha continued to pace the Howdah, and then they all heard shouts and screams coming from the pine forest in front of Pluck. Tabitha's heart pounded and at first, she thought it was because she was afraid. There was fear in her heart but it was for Pluck as she faced the Shadow alone. The muscle in her chest continued to drum, but it was encouraging her to join and not watch as Gamemnon's Femor. "Where are you going?" Gamemnon questioned her as Tabitha moved to the edge of the Howdah as if she would leap down. "I am doing what I should have done while I was in the Valley of Blood," she answered. "I am going to face the Shadow." "Stay here," he commanded her. "Let your servir take care of the Shadow for you." Tabitha didn't like his order, but she obeyed and moved beside GuideMa so she could watch Alba. More screams proceeded the first of the Shadow as they cleared the pine forest. Alba barely moved as if she was giving the Shadow a few moments more to come into the path of her attack. Gamemnon walked up to the two females who looked into the distance. He watched, not the one he believed to be the true Serviatrix, but the one who had been by his side since they were children. It was almost as if he couldn't envision his history without GuideMa there beside him or behind him or in front of him. The Femor's demeanor didn't seem to change in the least as the Shadow rushed for the vile Woman and if he had been just a normal observer, he would have thought that GuideMa was just watching the Woman as she was instructed to. Gamemnon was no normal observer when it came to the Femor. He knew GuideMa as much as he knew himself. She clenched the edge of the Howdah with stress-filled fingers. Her green-brown hands shook slightly from agitation, and anxiety clung to every inch of her four arms. Her nine-hands frame towered over all of them but at that very moment, she seemed small as if something deep within her had struck out at her and chopped her down to a height of a coward. The one, who had always been by his side, the one, who he had saved from a life of misery, she... she was worried for the vile Woman. More than that... GuideMa was afraid for her and ashamed she stood so far away from her. Tabitha watched, guilt-ridden she was still standing in the Howdah as the Shadow neared Alba. Groth, her Roth bodyguard, noticed the dilemma waging inside her. Tabitha wanted to take her sword and confront the Shadow herself. Tabitha almost disobeyed and leapt down, but then Alba let loose the power of the Lux and struck down two hundred Shadow. Tabitha was in awe of the weapon her servir possessed, a weapon she once tried to steal from her. The Shadow instantly died, and Tabitha's guilt was immediately eased. Alba was able to defeat them. She protected her... Alba protected everyone within the convoy. Her easement didn't last long for more Shadow appeared and there were twice as many. They mowed over their fellow Shadow as Alba once again prepared to attack with her sword. Both Tabitha and GuideMa watched as Alba began to swipe the Lux for a second time but her movements were awkward as if something was hindering her from completing her attack. Alba collapsed to one knee, and Tabitha felt the blood drain from her face as Malus, upon his winged beast, descended off to the side of her and away from the clearing. A Shadow Femor rode behind him. "Abhora has come," GuideMa spoke. "But I don't think they intend to reclaim the Woman. I believe they intend to kill her." GuideMa wanted to run to the Woman's side, but her loyalty to her duke kept her planted in her place. Tabitha once again prepared to jump down. "Stay where you are," Gamemnon ordered. "I can't protect you if you go down there." "I am supposed to protect all of you," Tabitha told him as she turned and

glared at him, but she was more upset with herself for not going the first time her heart told her to go. "Stay," he told her in a softer tone. "Look, the Woman is getting back to her feet." She turned and saw Alba rise as if enduring some sort of pain, and she was able to rise back to both feet. Alba looked as though she prepared to deal one final blow to the Shadow. She lifted the Lux. The sword gathered energy from all around it, and the blade brightly glowed like lightning caught in a fraction of time. Tabitha saw Malus lift his Constraining Dagger, and she quickly turned her attention back to Alba. She drew back the Lux as if to swipe it when some sort of energy exploded from her body, and Alba fell to the ground. Tabitha heard herself scream as her servitor died right before her. The Shadow ran past Pluck's lifeless form and headed straight for them. Tabitha's mind filled with confusion and sorrow. She didn't know what to do. Her time to take action had been ignored by her and now it was too late to do anything. She started to cry. Fairah, who had positioned herself in the air in the midst of the DraKa Convoy, shot out a light and blinded the Shadow. She didn't have time to mourn her daughter's death, and Fairah declared, "The light will not last long. Prepare all of ye to defend ye's selves." The light blinded the Shadow so much and hurt their eyes that they retreated back to the woods, whining like frightened dogs. GuideMa wanted to rush to the Woman but her loyalty bound her to Gamemnon's command, so she turned to him and said, "Order me, and I will obey. He told her, "I thought I had already given you an order." She said, "Tell me to forsake the Woman and even though something within me is telling me to save her. Tell me to forsake the False One, and I will obey you." After the vile Woman had slaughtered the first wave of Shadow, Gamemnon hadn't taken his eyes off of her. Pluck was dead or dying, so Gamemnon opened his mouth to give such an order but then he saw something that made him pause. GuideMa, the Femor he had saved when they were both young, was crying, not just one tear but tears upon tears. He questioned her, "What is the Woman to you?" "One I must watch," she replied as if the answer was so simple, and then GuideMa demanded, "Tell me to forsake her, and I will." She repeated it as if she needed to hear the command to keep herself from acting, "Tell me to forsake her, and I will." "Who is the Woman to you?" Gamemnon asked as her first answer didn't satisfy the question. Everything she had seen, everything she had witnessed up to that moment, and what she saw when Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser were furthest apart... The Woman had unknowingly stood atop the Throne of Kroth when the dancing lights of green and blue began to become as Man's blood. GuideMa witnessed this and witnessed something more, and now those same flickering lights whirled around within her mind. GuideMa wanted to act but she didn't want to disobey him, so she yelled, "Tell me to forsake her! And I will!" "Who is the Woman to you?" Gamemnon shouted but only because the Femor was yelling at him. "She... Pluck is..." GuideMa started and glanced at Tabitha as she debated her answer. GuideMa had known for sun's cycles now, but she had never said it out loud. She didn't need to say it out loud until now, so she replied, "Pluck is the Serviatrix." He let out a mighty roar that scared both Tabitha and his Aviatrix, and then he ordered the Femor, "You will stay here! You will watch the end of the vile Woman from here!" GuideMa turned from him and obeyed as she watched the second wave of Shadow slowly shake off the effects of the Immortal Woman's blinding light. Gamemnon also looked on but for some reason, he turned to the Femor and watched her instead. One of the few people he could actually call a friend was deeply hurt by an order he had given her, and he couldn't understand why she was feeling the way that she did. It wasn't the first time someone had been harmed by one of his orders... many had died under his orders, but it made him sick to

see GuideMa this way. He could always count on her to be so strong but at this very moment, she was hurting and he could only add to her hurt. "The hold the vile Woman has over Duke Votar and some of the others must come to an end," he spoke. "I thought about ending her many times before, but now the Shadow will do the deed for me. Now let us watch the end of—" Gamemnon spoke but before he could finish, Tabitha jumped down from the Howdah with her sword at the ready and ran forward to meet the advancing Shadow. "No! Come back!" he screamed. "Do you hear me? Come back!" "Tabitha will not come back," GuideMa told him as tears continued to stream down her face. "She has heeded the voice within her, and she will save the Serviatrix." GuideMa prayed under her breath, "Save Alba." Gamemnon roared again as he slammed his fists on the edge of the Howdah, and then he questioned Tabitha's Roth bodyguard, "Why are you not by her side?" Groth hadn't taken his eyes off of Tabitha, and he answered, "This is something that she must do without me." "You are all fools!" Gamemnon yelled, and then he turned back to the Femor and said, "I order you to tell me who this Woman is to you. I do not want to hear that she is the Serviatrix!" "What is there to say if I can't tell you that she is the Serviatrix?" GuideMa questioned him as her eyes never left the Woman's body that was on the ground. "She is a vile Woman. She is hopeful even when there is no hope. She is frail and yet strong. The vile disdainful Woman just laid down her life to save us. How can she not be the Serviatrix?" "Tabitha is the true Serviatrix," he stated. "I know," GuideMa spoke. "I know." "If you know, why do you want to save the False One?" "I already answered you," she told him. "I will not repeat it, not even for you." His anger had lessened toward the Femor. He didn't think anyone could save the vile Woman, but he wasn't worried about her. GuideMa though... The one, who he had saved as a child... The one, who in returned saved his soul when he was a child, was in agony and he could do nothing... he was unwilling to do anything that could alleviate her pain. Gamemnon ordered his guards, "Prepare to fend off the Shadow. Fire upon them when they are in range but do not hit Tabitha or it will be your life that I take." "You are not going after your Serviatrix?" GuideMa questioned her duke. "No, Tabitha is the true Serviatrix. She does not need my protection." GuideMa told him, "You are contradicting yourself." He said nothing to her comment.

In the clearing...

Tabitha reached Alba as the last of the Shadow scampered into the cover of the pine forest. The Shadow were still blinded by the Immortal Woman's light and whimpering. Fairah's light was so bright it was hard for Tabitha to see but she did make out Sabrina standing there looking over Alba's body. "I didn't see you come. You are like some shadow. Why are you here?" Tabitha questioned her. She pointed her sword at her as she asked, "Are you here to kill Alba? I won't let you hurt her." "Hurt her," Sabrina laughed at her. "The False One is already dead. There is no breath left in her." Tabitha looked to Alba and saw that she wasn't breathing. She was about to kneel to her, but the blinding light, keeping the Shadow back, started to fade. Tabitha turned and yelled at the Immortal Woman, "Your daughter has no breath in her!" Fairah heard her and started to pray as she kept the blinding light on the Shadow. Tabitha turned back and asked, "What do you intend to do?" Sabrina glanced at the Shadow, who were screeching and cursing at them as their whimpering lessened, then Sabrina turned her attention to the False One, and declared, "I intend to do what I must to bring about my vision of the world free of highborns." She turned and faced the Shadow and then called upon the power of her twin short swords.

They glowed as they absorbed power from the surrounding air. Tabitha also turned and faced the Shadow. She wasn't sure how to use IceDiamond so she spoke to it as she had seen Alba speak to her weapon. "Help me," Tabitha whispered to the sword. "I don't know how to use you, but I want to save those I care about." She raised it in the air, and the blade began to glow as it also absorbed energy from the surrounding air, and then Tabitha pleaded, "Help me defeat the Shadow." Fairah could no longer keep the blinding light over the Shadow as she hadn't had a chance to fully rest and recuperate. She had used a great amount of her powers when reverting time back while in the Valley of Blood. Fairah also needed to conserve her power for another task she must complete. The light faded, and the Shadow stood there a few mites more as their eyes readjusted. Fairah started to use her remaining power on her daughter, but she had miscalculated and used too much of it. She wouldn't be able to use her Maag-Ilee again for a few mites, so she called upon an old friend, and a small twister appeared and headed toward her daughter. The Shadow slowly started out of the tree line and headed for the two female Necroms. They screamed their bloodlust and started to charge as they all raced out.

In the clearing...

Sabrina let loose her attack first followed by Tabitha, and their swords' power shredded the Shadow line and a third of them fell dead. The remaining Shadow halted their attack, quivering before the might of two would-be Serviatrices. Sabrina immediately began to recharge her short swords as Tabitha stood there stunned by the power of her own sword. "We did it," Tabitha uttered. "We killed the Shadow." Sabrina informed her, "Only a few have been killed. I have slain them and there are much more that I must slay." "We did it together," Tabitha insisted. "We—" "There is no we, highborn," Sabrina told her. "There is only my family and everyone else. You highborns don't understand hardship or what it is like to be us, so we have to watch out for our own." "You mentioned this word highborn before," Tabitha spoke. "I am not sure of the meaning of highborn, but you make it sound like some insult." Sabrina diverted her focus from her twin swords, and the recharging slowed as she bickered with Tabitha. She declared as contempt for all highborns oozed out of her words, "It is much more than an insult." Sabrina paused as her rage, that was once aimed at the Shadow, was now aimed at the one standing beside her, and she informed the highborn, "It is the charge against you and your kind of your guilt. We are tired of you lording over us. We want to be free." "I'm not sure of what you are talking about, but I don't like the way you are saying it," Tabitha said as she turned her attention to Sabrina and ignored the Shadow. Sabrina lowered her short swords and also turned her attention away from the Shadow as her anger grew against Tabitha. Sabrina shouted as a knee-high twister moved between them and approached Pluck, "I should kill you now, highborn! I will prove to the others that I am the true Serviatrice, and then I alone will destroy the Shadow." The Shadow saw the two of them bickering, so they continued their charge with new vigor. Some ran at them with fear while others a renewed bloodlust to taste the flesh of their enemy who had killed so many of them. Meanwhile, the knee-high twister, that Fairah had sent over to her daughter, shrunk even more until it was the size of a hand. The twister forced its way into Pluck's lungs through her nostrils and through the hold the choker had on her neck. Oxygen was restored to her as the twister inflated and deflated to take over for her lungs, and then the twister sent out a small electrical charge to restart her heart. The twister did this several times within her until Pluck sat up and gasped as if she had just been injected with adrenaline. She sat there gasping for several

moments and as she started to calm down, Pluck felt as if something wasn't right about herself. The twister continued to send out a smaller charge to keep her heart beating as there was no life force within her to do so on its own. Fairah whispered to her through the twister, and her mother explained what she had done to revive her and that the Shadow were still a threat. Pluck understood why her lungs and throat felt so raw and inflamed, but she didn't understand why she felt so... odd. "I feel as though something is missing," she spoke to her mother. "Your life force is gone," Fairah explained. "I have given you some of mine but because I am still weak from my ordeal in the Valley of Blood, the life force I have given you is only temporary." "Life force... Malus took my life and so you are saying I am dead but borrowing your life." "Yes, my daughter," Fairah replied. Pluck slowly rose to her feet as Tabitha and Sabrina argued, and Pluck questioned, "How much time do I have?" "You have at least fifteen mites," Fairah answered. "Beyond that, I cannot guarantee." Pluck glanced back at the two bickering, and they didn't even notice she was back on her feet. The Shadow had noticed, and they paused in their tracks to see what she would do. "The Shadow are fewer," Pluck commented as she started to recharge the Lux. Fairah told her, "Tabitha and Sabrina's combined forces took out a large portion of their remaining force." "Why didn't they finish them off?" "You can hear why," Fairah answered. "I am very weak," Pluck admitted in a whisper. "I don't know if I can eliminate the last of the Shadow or even the strength to encourage Tabitha and Sabrina to work together." She noticed Malus and Abhora still sitting on his winged beast, and she said, "I will try a different plan of action." Pluck stumbled toward them as she continued to recharge the Lux.

Over on the side of the clearing...

"I thought you killed the False One," Abhora spoke. "I took her life," Malus stated. "She should be dead." He raised his Constraining Dagger to take what life was still within her, but the dagger had no hold over the life within the False One. "I believe the Immortal has interfered. I did take all of Pluck's life force. She is a corpse walking around on someone's borrowed life force." "It looks like she means to kill us," Abhora stated. "Destroy her body before she is able to go through with her final wishes." Malus slid down from his winged beast, lifted his hand to the other Shadow, and commanded, "Hold off your attack! I will take care of this False One." The Shadow gladly listened to him, and Tabitha and Sabrina turned and saw that Pluck was back on her feet. Tabitha started toward her servitor when the Shadow Necrom gave her a warning. "Take another step, and I will have the Shadow rush upon you and slay you. Stay where you are and you will have a few mites more to live." "Why should I listen—" Tabitha started to ask when Sabrina grabbed her arm. "Listen to him," Sabrina whispered. "And it will give us time to recharge our weapons." Tabitha nodded and refocused her efforts on recharging IceDiamond, and she watched Pluck with great concern. She whispered to the one who couldn't hear her, "Do not die here, Alba. Don't you dare die here." Pluck stopped some distance from the two Shadow, and she told Malus, "You made a mistake." "What mistake is that?" he questioned. "You have taken my life and no longer have any leverage over me," Pluck replied as she began to charge the Lux. "I am free to kill you now." "The life you have within you now won't sustain you long," Malus told her. "You will also die." "I know," Pluck replied as she held the Lux in both of her hands as the sword was nearly charged. "Do not think that the one who is keeping you alive can do so after my death," Malus threatened her. "Our lives are linked. If I die, you die." "I thought as much," Pluck said as she shifted her feet, preparing to swing and deliver a mighty blow. "I will kill the two

of you and maybe save all those I care about." Abhora spoke up, "Perhaps now is the time for negotiations. We have what information I sought." "We will open up negotiations," Malus said. "We will—" Pluck interrupted him, "I don't have long so you will have three mites to completely withdraw from this area or I will kill as many of you as I can. You will also swear not to hinder us as we make our way to our next destination. You will also swear not to hinder us as we go about our business while at our next destination." He turned to the Shadow Femor, and Abhora said, "We can agree to that." The Shadow Femor lifted her hand and what was left of the Shadow withdrew back into the pine forest. Malus held out his hand for the False One and said, "Come, I will take you with me now." "You already have what you own of me," Pluck told him. "I will be going nowhere with you. You have two mites left before I kill you two." Malus' heart felt sick when he heard that what he did own of her was no more and there was nothing that connected them. He glanced at his dagger where Pluck's life force resided. Malus was afraid that he had all that he would ever have of her. "We should leave," Abhora spoke from the winged beast. "Mount and let us fly away before she destroys us." "I will not leave," he insisted. "The False One belongs to us. The False One belongs to me." "Have you ever heard this False One speak something that she did not mean?" Abhora questioned him. "Mount your beast and let us flee." Malus held out his hand to Pluck more forcefully and ordered, "Come with me." "One mite," Pluck spoke. "You have one mite left to live." Malus roared, and then he swore, "You will die! I have already taken your life and you will die! The life force that is within you is about to leave you and you will die!" "I am already dead," she told him. "You have half a mite left to live!" "Malus!" Abhora yelled. "Mount your beast or I will kill you myself!" He roared with frustration, turned, and mounted his winged beast, knowing Pluck wouldn't change her mind. Malus commanded his beast, and it lifted into the air. The tiny twister remained in her lungs and throat, making them all the more raw and dry as it swirled around. She could breathe, but once Fairah's life force left her... Pluck knew she was about to die. She wanted to turn to Tabitha and find comfort with one she considered a sister but there wasn't time for words or comfort. Pluck took a step away from the two Serviatrixes to head into the pine forest, and then she collapsed as Fairah's life force slowly left her body. Malus had his winged beast circle the area above the False One and with the aid of his dagger, he could see the foreign life force trickling out of her body. He commented, "She never once begged for her life. The False One could have added it to the deal she made with us." "Yes, she could have," Abhora said. "Maybe she didn't want to be bound to you anymore. Maybe she found those of importance to her of more importance than herself. I have heard of such weak things happening among those who are not of the Shadow." The life force trapped within the dagger left the weapon as Malus said, "I will not let her escape me. I will have all of her." He directed his winged beast, and they flew off as the life force he released returned to Pluck. Fairah's life force finished leaving her as Pluck felt her own return. She laid on the ground and stared up at the tops of the pine trees around her. Malus had given back her life, and he also released the hold the choker had on her. Tabitha was soon by her side and moments later, Fairah was there. Pluck felt her body lift into the air as Fairah used her Maag-Ilee to float her back to Tabitha's DraKa. Pluck slipped into unconsciousness and remembered no more after that. Sabrina walked behind Tabitha the entire time, observing how those around her reacted to the False One and her plight. The False One was more deadly than she thought for the False One had people who cared for her. Sabrina returned to her DraKa and her companions. Ferlis spoke to her, "You went out to prove that you were the true Serviatrix." "What of it?" Sabrina asked

the male Femor. "I used the power of my swords and the Shadow fell." "Yes, but... The False One, in the end, was the one who saved us as you bickered with the highborn," Ferlis told her as if he had to. "I am concerned that you find bickering with a highborn more important than completely eliminating the enemy that would have killed us all. You are passionate about your beliefs but sometimes that passion blinds you. You have to remain focus on our goals." "I know," Sabrina said. "Now I don't know if we can frame the False One for the death of Tabitha. I mean many would believe that she is capable of murdering her mistress but..." "But what?" Ferlis inquired when she didn't finish. "Maybe it is the False One that I need to make sure we eliminate. As I said, she is very deadly. Her convictions seem to be as strong as mine."

Chapter Two

BloodGlacier Alcazar

Much earlier...

Within the rundown structure far from the convoy...

"I would like to look just a little longer," SoarOn said. "The words on this statue are too degraded for me to read, but I have this sense that they are of great importance. Both of ye come and see for ye's selves." JuJu and Tad moved to where the Immortal Egle motioned and saw a headless statue and as SoarOn had said, there were words there that they couldn't make out. The dead vines that had fled Tad's light as he first entered the area began to creep closer to the three. They would take the Immortals and imprison them. "There is writing but as ye said, it is unreadable," Tad stated. "The headless statue is pointing in that direction," JuJu said as he moved over to the spot. "There is a small opening here and stairs that descend. Shall we go further?" SoarOn answered as he walked past the Immortal Necrom and took the lead, "It is why we are here." JuJu snarled at the Immortal Egle. He wasn't sure why but SoarOn was getting under his fur. He and then Tad followed the Immortal Egle down several levels of spiraling stairs. Many of the steps looked like they might crumble under their weight, but they held, and the Immortals continued their descent. Tad looked over the edge into the darkness and spoke, "If I could die, I would be afraid we would fall to our deaths on this crumbling stairs." Some time later, they reached the bottom, and their lights revealed only more of a crumbling structure. SoarOn stated, "There is only one way to go." He led them through a tunnel that was large enough they could walk side-by-side, not that they did. The dead vines followed them down the stairs and crept up behind them. They paused at the bottom of the stairs as if something prevented them from going any further. The vines decided they would wait for the Immortals to return and then they would strike. SoarOn continued to lead, and the group passed a pile of rocks that were crystal-like in structure. They walked for a few more mites, and then more tunnels began to connect to the tunnel they were in. "The structure down here must be vast," Tad commented. "If there is something down here to find, there must be a way to find it other than stumbling around in the dark." "What do ye suggest?" SoarOn questioned him. "I suggest..." Tad began. "I am not sure what I am suggesting only that we must do something other than what we are doing." "Ye are a

genius," JuJu mocked the Immortal Toadian. "I can see why ye selected Sabrina as the true Serviatrix." "Who have ye selected?" Tad angrily questioned him. "Have ye decided that the False One is the true Serviatrix?" "I have decided... I have... decided..." JuJu paused as he felt something, and then he said, "I sense that the Shadow are close." "Are they within this structure with us?" Tad inquired as their argument could wait. "No... they are..." JuJu answered as he stretched out his senses. "I cannot sense a thing," Tad admitted. "What of ye, SoarOn?" The Immortal Egle just shook his head. Tad spoke, "JuJu, ye could always sense things before any of us could. Do ye know where the Shadow are?" "I believe they are near the convoy." He turned and headed back the way they had come as he uttered, "I believe they are preparing to attack the convoy." Tad said, "Maybe it was unwise for the three of us to come out here. I should have stayed by Sabrina's side." JuJu rushed on closely followed by Tad. SoarOn watched them leave him, and then the Immortal Egle glanced in the direction they had been going in. He turned and followed the other two Immortals. The dead vines that had gathered at the bottom of the stairs sensed that their prey was returning to them, so they spread out and left the floor and gathered all around the walls around the stair. They would pounce upon their prey once they had started back up the stairs. The Immortal Necrom passed the pile of crystal-like rocks, and then JuJu upped and stopped and returned to them. Tad had already passed the pile by the time JuJu returned to them, and he questioned the Immortal Necrom, "What are ye doing?" "There is something about these rocks," JuJu answered, and then he lifted his voice and said, "Ye there, are ye some sort of guardian?" "I am," the pile of crystal-like rocks spoke and as it spoke it glowed green. SoarOn arrived at the pile and asked, "What do ye protect?" The pile ignored the Immortal Egle. "What sort of creature are ye?" JuJu inquired, and then he commanded, "Reveal ye's self." The pile of crystal-like rocks gathered themselves together and lifted. They took on the form of a great deer with antlers so huge they almost took up the entire width of the tunnel. The deer was called a Krystallos Barasingha, and it was made of living tetragonal crystals. Its Swamp-green crystalline hair looked woolly from a distance and more rock-like the closer one got and was dark on top while the hair on the throat, belly, inside of the thighs, and beneath the tail was a pale green. The neck was maned, and the huge antlers were a deep forest-green. Tad uttered, "It is a Krystallos Barasingha. I have not seen ye's kind in over two hundred seasons." "My kind, for the most part, has gone into hiding," the Krystallos Barasingha spoke. "Do you know that the Cursed are loosed and the Shadow..." the Krystallos Barasingha turned his attention to the Immortal Egle and continued, "...roam the lands freely?" SoarOn remained silent, so JuJu answered, "We do." "Have the Serviatrixes come by three?" the Krystallos Barasingha inquired. "They have," JuJu answered. "Now answer our questions. What are ye the guardian of?" "Words," the Krystallos Barasingha replied. "They have been passed from one guardian to the next. After so many seasons have gone, I thought the Serviatrixes would never appear." Tad questioned, "Whose words are these? I cannot tell by the structure." The Krystallos Barasingha answered, "They are words from the Immortals of Man." The deer acted as if he would say more on the matter, but then he just said, "I will speak the words only once so listen very carefully." The Krystallos Barasingha paused and then stated, "The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. The Serviatrix can only depend on the Serviatrix. Victory comes from this understanding. Death follows those who believe in themselves." The deer paused and said, "Life shall be taken and given back, and the False One shall emerge stronger than before. Take heed for the False One shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief. The Shadow shall strengthen themselves and fracture at

the same time. The Shadow shall rally behind the False One for the False One shall reveal what had been concealed and forgotten." The Krystallos Barasingha stomped his hoof as if impatient to leave, and then he said, "The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. One shall betray the very heart of the Serviatrix as past ghosts haunt the present." He paused once more and then spoke, "The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. The heart of a true mother shall destroy the heart of the one she gave birth to. Hearts are fragile but also can be mended. Break a heart and fly away... and true salvation shall come to the one who would have fought to hold on." The Krystallos Barasingha finished and then galloped through the tunnel away from the stairs and disappeared into the distance. "We have discovered one of the prophecies from the Immortals of Man," SoarOn uttered after he had been stunned to silence for so long. "Ye sound surprised," JuJu commented. "It is the reason we came here. We should return and tell the others." "We should," SoarOn agreed. "We should without delay or obstacles." "Obstacles..? I guess we do have to hoof it all the way back up the stairs and to the entrance," JuJu commented. "I should have summoned a beast to help with this very long trek." "Ye can do so once we reach the top," Tad spoke. The Immortal Toadian and JuJu went on ahead and entered the area at the bottom of the stairs. They ascended the steps and started to make their way out. The dead vines had all disappeared by the time they neared the bottom of the stairs. SoarOn looked in the direction the Krystallos Barasingha headed in once more, and then he followed his fellow Immortals.

* * *

The Fletching Kingdom...

The Fletching Castle...

Queen Jezebel sat with her grand-niece, blue-eyed Pepin, in the garden full of butterflies. The multi-colored winged insects fluttered about them as they drank rose tea. "This tea smells so wonderful like flowers," Pepin commented. "What is in it?" "Rose petals from the Rose Garden," Jezebel replied. "It is one of my favorite teas." "It is now one of my favorites," Pepin replied after she took a sip. "Auntie.., can we talk about the giant frog?" "Do you mean, the odd creature?" The blonde girl nodded, and the curls on her head bounced. "What do you wish to speak about?" Jezebel questioned her. "I heard that she saved my life and that she became sick because she did save me," Pepin spoke. "I also heard that she bit me." She lifted her arm that was bandaged and said, "I still have the fang marks. I saw them when the physician cleaned my wounds." Jezebel told her, "It is as you said." "I was also told that you went and saw the giant frog. Is she still sick?" "You should not worry about the odd creature." "I do worry about her," Pepin told her aunt. "I like the giant frog and wish to be friends with her and play with her but you have forbidden me to do so. I love you, auntie, and do not wish for you to be upset with me in any way. Please permit me to see the giant frog." "I do not know if I can," Jezebel admitted. "Do you still see the giant frog as... insignificant?" Pepin questioned her. "Have you been listening in on conversations that you should not be?" "I hear what I hear," Pepin replied. "I see the odd creature as significant only because she saved you and my son loves it... loves her," Jezebel answered. "Do not forget that I like the giant frog," Pepin said. "I believe I find her of... what is the word the silly frog uses? I think I find her of..." "Importance," Jezebel spoke. "Yes, that is the word. I find the giant frog of importance." "If you find the odd creature of importance, you should use her name when you refer to her." "I shall remember that," Pepin said. "May I go see the giant

fr... May I go see Adroit and thank her for saving me?" "We shall both go," Jezebel answered. "I have yet to give a proper thank you to the odd creature."

Sometime later...

The Rose Garden...

Edward, Virago, Lady Flaxen, and Adroit were enjoying sometime in the garden. Edward had requested that the Queen have the area cleared so that his family could enjoy some alone time. A few of his personal guards were in the outskirts of the garden keeping watch. Sinew, Fracas, Parry, Commander Ardor, and Vim his Second were close by the royal family as added security since the incident with the poisonous insect. Special hunters had been called in to comb all the grounds of the castle for any more unwelcome intruders like the centipede that had poisoned Pepin. They had not found any, but the Queen kept them on to check once a day with a bounty on any creature found that was poisonous. Edward told his wife, "In a few sun's cycles, we shall be moving to the Fletching Palace to take up permeant residence. It had been delayed because of what happened to Adroit, but I do not know if I am ready just yet." "I feel the same as you," Virago said. "I am to officially become the Empress of the Five Kingdoms. We shall have to lend each other our strength." They continued talking but of more the present and of their daughter as she played among the flowers. About a half nal went by, and Queen Jezebel entered the Rose Garden and Pepin was with her. Pepin immediately ran over to Adroit, and the Queen walked over to her son. "Mother..." Edward spoke, allowing his mother to start the conversation. "Pepin has been asking about your odd cre... She has been asking about your daughter. I have decided to give her some time to thank your daughter for saving her life." Jezebel turned and saw Adroit, and then the Queen said, "Your daughter appears to be back to her normal self." "She has gotten better over the last few sun's cycles," Edward said. He waited for his mother to continued speaking, but she appeared to have said everything she had intended to say.

A short distance away...

Adroit smiled when she saw Pepin come into her garden. She found this child of Man to be of importance to her and it gave her... joy to see her again. Pepin ran over to her and took both of her hands into her hands and said, "Auntie says I should use your name and not call you giant frog if I find you of importance." "Do you find me of importance?" Adroit questioned her. "I do." "You can call me, giant frog. I do not mind since you find me of importance." "I shall, but only when we are alone," Pepin whispered to her and giggled. "I do not want Auntie finding out."

Chapter Three

BloodGlacier Alcazar

Pluck opened her eyes and was immediately greeted by Zenba who was sitting on the bed. "She's awake!" her friend declared. "She's awake." Pluck wanted to sit up but found she didn't have the energy to do so. She didn't know it yet, but she had been brought to a residence that would be hers while she stayed at the BloodGlacier Alcazar. The Hamarr were very generous and gave nearly everyone their own residence which put to shame the rooms they had at the TowerRoth Citadel. "What happened?" Pluck asked. "I don't remember anything past leaving Tabitha's DraKa to face the Shadow." Zenba moved closer to her face, and then she said, "You were able with the Lux to take out the first wave of Shadow, but then the Shadow Necrom used his dagger on you." "I remember a little now. Malus took my life," Pluck spoke. "He did," Fairah stated as she moved up beside her daughter's bed. "I lent ye some of my life force and ye were able to threaten the Shadow into retreating." "Why were Tabitha and Sabrina standing over me when I awoke?" Pluck questioned. "The two of them attacked the Shadow with their own swords," Zung replied as he came and joined his sister on the bed. "I believe they would have completely destroyed the Shadow if they had not started... bickering." "They worked together and nearly defeated the Shadow," Pluck muttered to herself, and then she asked, "Did the Shadow honor their deal?" Zung answered, "We arrived safely at Hamarr's BloodGlacier Alcazar. We lost no one on our way thanks to you." "I alone didn't save us," Pluck spoke, and then she asked as she glanced around the room, "Where is—" "Votar had been by your side for the past few nals," Zenba answered before she could finish asking. "He just excused himself a few mites ago. Votar said something about putting his plan together." Pluck said, "I am so weak." "And ye shall continue to be so for the next few nals," Fairah told her. "Even with my healing power, losing one's life force takes a toll on one's body. Even ye's rapid healing ability shall do ye no good here." "Thank you," Pluck told her mother. "If you hadn't of lent me your life force, I don't know what would have happened." "Ye do not have to thank me," Fairah spoke. "Ye are my daughter." Pluck smiled, and then she said, "I am hungry." "I had some swamp chicken broth prepared for ye," Fairah said. Her grin widened as Pluck remembered GuideMa's comment when she was tossing her about from DraKa to DraKa. "Can ye eat it on ye's own?" "I don't know," Pluck admitted as she tried to sit up again. Fairah assisted her in sitting up, and then Fairah took the bowl of broth, sat on a stool, dipped the spoon in the bowl, and prepared to deliver it to her daughter's lips. "Are you going to feed me?" Pluck questioned after she chuckled. "I cannot see ye doing it on ye's own," her mother replied. "I could have the KellyZing do so but I envision more broth spilt than consumed. No offense to you, Zenba." "No offense taken," Zenba replied. "And I have already bathed." At first, Pluck wasn't sure what her friend meant by mentioning a bath but then she smiled again. "Ye must not be too tired," Fairah told her as she slightly jiggled the spoon in front of her daughter's mouth. Pluck opened and slurped the broth as her mother said, "Ye have had the energy to smile three times now." Pluck tried not to grin again over her comment, but she couldn't help herself and said, "It is the fault of you two. You both should stop trying to make me smile and allow me to conserve my energy." The bowl of broth was nearly half gone when SoarOn, Tabitha, Groth, Gamemnon, and GuideMa entered. "Fairah," SoarOn began. "Could I

please have a moment of ye's time?" "I just need to finish feeding my lazy daughter," she replied as she winked at Pluck to tell her that she was only teasing her. "I can do that," Tabitha told her as she moved to the side of the Immortal Woman. Fairah was about to say she didn't need to, but then she considered she needed to be considerate of Tabitha's feelings. Gamemnon had kept her out of the room while Pluck was resting. Tabitha must have finally had her way and they were there. Gamemnon didn't look all that happy and GuideMa... she looked. Fairah wasn't sure what she looked like. "My daughter is a finicky eater. Make sure she eats all of the broth," Fairah told her as she stood and handed Tabitha the bowl of broth. Tabitha sat on the stool, and then she began to feed Pluck as she would a baby Roth. She made sound effects as if the spoon was a bird. Zenba covered her own mouth with one of her hands, trying not to laugh at the female Necrom. Pluck found herself smiling again and had to control some laughter of her own so not to bring embarrassment on her mistress. "Fairah was only teasing you," Pluck told Tabitha. "I am only tired and eating very slowly, but I am famished and intend to eat all that is there." Tabitha felt her face flush and ignored her statement and just fed her normally. Zenba fluttered into the air, casting a jade-green glow, and then she inquired of Tabitha, "Do you mind if I sit on your shoulder? I feel a little left out of the conversation sitting on the bed." "You may," Tabitha replied. "I heard it is actually a great honor to have a KellyZing sit on one's shoulder. My father, King Malodor, will be so jealous when he hears of this." Zenba sat on her shoulder as Tabitha continued to feed Pluck. Fairah went out into the hallway with SoarOn. Gamemnon turned to follow them, and he started to command GuideMa to follow him, but then he saw the look of worry on the female Femor's face and silenced his commands. He started out, and GuideMa immediately followed him. Gamemnon didn't look at her as he commanded, "Retake your duties watching over the vile Woman." He continued out into the hallway and started for his room. GuideMa was grateful for his consideration, turned, and found a wall to lean on out of the way. Tabitha fed Pluck until the bowl of broth was empty. "I heard you went out and faced the Shadow," Pluck spoke to Tabitha. "I did," Tabitha replied. "I... Sabrina and I were able to slay a large number of them with our swords' magic, but we were nowhere near you and your sword's might." "Was it the first time you used IceDiamond?" "It was." Pluck told her, "I only scared three bandits the first time I used the Lux." "I did not know," Tabitha said. "I thought you only completed great deeds." "It was great at the time. Edward, my prince... my emperor..." Pluck paused, smiled, and said, "Edward, my brother, was in danger, and I helped save him." "He is the one who rules over those of Man who shipwrecked on Wellspring." Pluck nodded, and then she noticed GuideMa off by herself leaning against one of the walls. She got this sense that something was deeply troubling the Femor. "We have to do something about your choker," Zenba spoke up. "You won't be free of the Shadow until you are free of that device." Pluck thought about how easily Malus had taken her life. He had not enacted its true power over her until that sun's cycle. She wasn't sure why he gave her life back to her. The Shadow must still have plans for her... for the False One. "Quip and Staunch volunteered to go scout the surrounding area for Shadow," Zung spoke. "We sent both Calico Winsome Kits with them, and they will use one to relay information back and forth." "Even the tiny cats are lending aid to the cause," Pluck stated. "I felt so useless in the last battle." "Do you mean the battle where we all cowered behind you on the DraKas and watched you face the Shadow alone?" Zenba questioned her friend. "You did force the Shadow to retreat, and you did force the Shadow to give us safe passage to here." "I still feel as though I failed everyone," Pluck stated as she placed a hand to her own neck and said, "The

Gold Choker of Fettering is becoming a great hindrance to me. I have to find a way to free myself. I have to free myself from the Shadow." Pluck noticed how everyone was looking at her, so she said mostly to change the subject and lighten the mood, "Speaking of here... I heard we are at the BloodGlacier Alcazar. I would really like to see this place once I am feeling better. Also, I would like to meet the Hamarr." Zenba started to say something to bring the subject back to the Shadow and the Gold Choker of Fettering, but she was interrupted. "I believe I can fulfill one of your wishes now," a male voice spoke that Pluck didn't recognize. She looked to the door of her room and saw not a hallway but another room. A male creature was standing there and stepped through the doorway. Pluck realized he must be one of the Hamarr, and his people were nothing like anything she had seen so far or would have imagined. She knew the Hamarr were a race of humanoids that could survive both on the land and in the water. Pluck now had a face and body to go along with the beautiful voices she had heard earlier while they were traveling by DraKa. The Hamarr's heads were like a Hammerhead Shark's head including gills, but they also had nostrils to breathe the air. Their skin was smooth and gray, and their cephalofoil, the hammer looking part of their head, was exceptionally large. The cephalofoil was as wide as half their body height, and the Hamarr were very tall, a head taller than a Femor so that put their height at about ten hands tall. They had a set of legs and a set of arms and were somewhat muscular in build. The Hamarr standing before her wore a robe that gave him the appearance that he was someone in authority while another male Hamarr, who had come in moments after the other and who was now standing behind him, wore only trunks. The trunks were white and blue with silver markings. "I am Shamarr and this is Tomarr our Minister of Music," the one Hamarr spoke with command as if he led all the Hamarr there. "We have heard that there are three Serviatrix candidates among us." Shamarr paused, and then he said, "We went and visited the one. Sabrina is a very interesting Necrom." He glanced at the other Hamarr, and then Shamarr continued, "We also visited with Tabitha earlier. I see that she is here now feeding the other Serviatrix." He paused again and said, "We had a very interesting talk with her. We now come to speak with the last which Sabrina and a few others have referred to as the False One. What say you, Pluck? There can only be one true Serviatrix. Are you the true Serviatrix or is Sabrina or is Tabitha?" Pluck glanced at Tabitha, and then Pluck replied, "I could answer you or you could decide yourself. There are three of us. Who among us would be strongest alone?" "She speaks in riddles," the Minister of Music replied. Tomarr was less refrained than the other Hamarr, but he stood as Shamarr did with his hands behind his back. Only Tomarr's voice gave away his excitement as he added, "She and the other two Serviatrixes should be our honored guest for our next performance." Pluck said, "I would like that." "Maybe you shouldn't this next time," Zenba told her out of concern for her wellbeing. "All I seem to do at these places is sleep," Pluck complained. "I think I need to walk around, so a trip to this concert should do me some good." Tabitha scolded her, "I think you need to stay in bed until I tell you that you can get up. You make me worry far too much. I believe it is very unhealthy for me." "Which part?" Zenba questioned the one who had made her friend a slave. "The times Pluck nearly died or the time she gave her life away to the Shadow?" "All of those," Tabitha answered. "Has Alba always been this troublesome as a friend?" Zenba peered at Tabitha for a few moments, realizing she not only meant Pluck was friends with her but Tabitha also implied that she was friends with Pluck. Zenba smiled. Pluck had so few friends she could depend on. She was glad to see another emerge among those who not so long ago were her enemies. Zenba glanced back at the female Femor

who was still quietly standing by the wall. So many enemies surrounded Pluck. "It is settled then," Tabitha decided. "Alba will stay here and get better first." Shamarr spoke, "If it is your friend's health you are worried about, Hamarr Melodies are known for their healing properties that travel along sound waves." "Yes, it is a very ancient healing form," Tomarr agreed. "Our songs will enhance any healing including natural and Maag-Ilee forms of healing." Tabitha glanced at Zenba, and then the KellyZing said, "We should ask Fairah. She would know if it would be all right for Pluck to go." Tabitha nodded, so Zenba flew out and then sometime later, she flew back in. "Fairah said it would do her daughter good." "I could have told you that," Pluck said. "I shouldn't sleep my life away." "Fairah also said that Pluck shouldn't walk there just yet. She will need to be carried or—" "We actually have a mode of transportation that can assist her in her travels," Shamarr interrupted. "It is simply a chair with chariot-like wheels on it. We call it a chariot-chair." Zenba glanced at Tabitha, and Tabitha said, "We can all agree to that." Pluck frowned as she folded her arms and muttered, "I wanted to walk. How am I agreeing to this? I don't think I'm part of this we Tabitha is speaking about." She glanced at her friends, who did hear everything she said, so Pluck couldn't help but smile as she felt their concern and love for her, and she replied, "Fine... I will agree to this as long as I am allowed to walk around tomorrow." Zenba turned to Tabitha and spoke, "She is a very troublesome friend like you said and very demanding. Do all your servirs talk to you like this?" "Alba is my only servir and..." Tabitha replied, paused, and admitted, "Alba might carry the brand that marks her as a servir, but she is more like a sister to me." "So that would make us sisters," Zenba told her. "Or at least half-sisters." "No, we can be sisters also," Tabitha told her. "I never had a sister before Pluck and now I have two. My father, King Malodor, will be so jealous when he hears that not only did a KellyZing sit on my shoulder, but I am also friends with her now." Pluck liked that Zenba and Tabitha were getting along. Tabitha would have someone she could lean on if something should happen to her. Pluck was surprised by her own thoughts. She wasn't sure what would happen to her once she returned to the Shadow. It was good that her mind could find some comfort in the knowledge she wouldn't be leaving anyone behind to face things alone. "The next session will start in about a nal," Tomarr spoke as he interrupted her thoughts. "I will have a chariot-chair sent here within a half nal."

Earlier...

Out in the hallway...

SoarOn led Fairah a short distance from the False One's room, and then he turned to her and asked, "How is Pluck?" "Fine considering the Shadow Necrom took her life from her," Fairah answered. "Malus went ahead and took the life of the False One," SoarOn spoke his thoughts aloud. "And yet she lives." "Ye look very concerned over the news," Fairah stated. "What troubles ye?" "First, I must tell ye that we were successful in finding another prophecy," SoarOn replied. "I believe it is the prophecy I was looking for from the Immortals of Man." "Now ye sound surprised." "I do," he replied. "I guess I thought I would never find it. I also never thought I would find it where I did." She questioned, "What did this prophecy state?" SoarOn relayed the prophecy, "The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. The Serviatrix can only depend on the Serviatrix. Victory comes from this understanding. Death follows those who believe in themselves. Life shall be taken and given back, and the False One shall emerge stronger than

before. Beware of the False One for she shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief. The Shadow shall strengthen themselves and fracture at the same time. The Shadow shall rally behind the False One for the False One shall reveal what had been concealed and forgotten. The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. One shall betray the very heart of the Serviatrix as past ghosts haunt the present. The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. The heart of a true mother shall destroy the heart of the one she gave birth to. Hearts are fragile but also can be mended. Break a heart and fly away... and true salvation shall come to the one who would have fought to hold on." Fairah thought about his words 'the heart of a true mother' and for some reason, they deeply bothered her. "Did ye hear what has given me concern?" SoarOn questioned her. "No, I was a little distracted," Fairah admitted. He said, "There are three lines that bother me. 'Life shall be taken and given back, and the False One shall emerge stronger than before. Beware of the False One for she shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief. The Shadow shall rally behind the False One for the False One shall reveal what had been concealed and forgotten.' Do ye believe they speak of ye's daughter?" "I do not know," Fairah admitted. "Pluck claims to be the False One, but I am not sure why she would grab so firmly to such a title." He replied, "Maybe she has realized her role in all of this." "Her role?" "Yes, we all have a role to play in existence, and I believe she has found hers as the False One," SoarOn answered. "Shall ye still follow her as the False One?" "She is my daughter. I shall continue to support her." "Support and follow are not the same thing," he said. "I shall ask ye this question again but at another time. We have other matters to attend to. I shall be—" "Fairah!" Zenba called out as she left Pluck's residence. She flew over to them, and then the KellyZing said, "Fairah, the Hamarr have requested that Pluck attend their next concert. They said it will help her heal." "They are correct, but Pluck should not walk there. She shall need to be carried or transported in some way." "I will let them know," Zenba said as she flew back. SoarOn watched the KellyZing fly away, and then he stated, "As I was saying, I shall be gathering the others so that we can tell them of our findings. It sounds as if ye's daughter should rest. Ye can tell her of what transpired during the meeting once she has rested some more." "Actually, Pluck should attend this next concert. She can rest and enjoy the singing. We can have the meeting after the concert—" SoarOn interrupted her, "We really should have the meeting now. Let Pluck go to the Hamarr's concert and have one go with her, and the rest of us can have this important meeting." "If ye feel we should have this meeting as soon as possible, we can do as ye say. The Hamarr do have a concert three times a sun's cycle. We can attend the evening one. Pluck with one other can go to the next one." "It is settled then," SoarOn spoke. "I shall go now and find a room we can use for this important meeting. I shall send word to all parties where and when the meeting shall begin."

Back in Pluck's room...

"This is your last bite," Tabitha told her servir. "Eat it and make me happy." Pluck slurped down the last spoonful as her mother came back in. "SoarOn, JuJu, and Tad have some news for us concerning their finds within the structure they found," Fairah informed them. "We shall all be receiving news shortly on the location of the meeting." "I want Alba to rest some more," Tabitha said. "She is still very weak and does not need to be leaving her bed for a meeting. There is also the concert she will be attending. I think to go to both would be too much for her." "I agree and SoarOn said as much," Fairah spoke. "We should let her sit out this next meeting and let her rest

her mind along with her body." She went over and sat on her daughter's bed and said, "Ye should rest so that ye can enjoy the coming concert." Pluck stated, "It sounds like I will be going alone to the concert." "We shall have one go with ye," Fairah replied, turned to the female Necrom, and stated, "Tabitha, ye should come to the meeting, so we shall have another escort Pluck. I believe I—" "I can do it," Zenba interrupted. GuideMa finally spoke up after her long silence, "I will do it. I must watch the False One so I have to go with her. No need for anyone else to miss this important meeting." "I believe we need to discuss this issue further," Zenba said. "Pluck should attend the concert with someone who will help her enjoy it, not wish for her death with her glaring bug-like eyes. I or Fairah should go with Pluck." GuideMa said nothing. Fairah started again, "I believe I can go with—" A knock came to the residence main door. GuideMa answered it, and a Hamarr messenger came in. He informed Fairah, Zung, Zenba, Tabitha, Groth, and GuideMa of where the meeting would be held. "Ye have arrived very quickly," Fairah commented to the Hamarr messenger. "I did not expect to know of the location for at least a nal." "I am only relaying what I've been told," the Hamarr stated. "I must leave now. I have others I must inform." "I will stay with Alba," Tabitha declared as the Hamarr messenger left. "The rest of you go. I do not need to hear what is going on at this meeting. Someone can tell me once it is over." "No," Pluck said. "I do not need watching over and you should attend this meeting. It sounds as if it will be about the Serviatrix. I can go alone to the concert. All I need to do is sit, and I can manage on my own." "I shall stay with my daughter," Fairah spoke up. "I was going to suggest that before. I would not mind hearing the Hamarr sing again." "You should also attend. I do not need watching over," Pluck stated, then turned to the female KellyZing, and said, "You do not need to stay either. Go and hear what was discovered so that you three..." Pluck glanced at Zung and continued, "...can tell me of your opinion of the meeting." Tabitha inquired, "Don't you want to hear my opinion of the meeting?" Pluck wasn't sure why she was somewhat upset, and she asked, "Why would I want to hear your opinion of the meeting? You are the Serviatrix, and I am the False One. Shouldn't you discuss your opinion with Gamemnon?" "I think we should discuss it," Tabitha insisted. "I do not like that we are separated on this." Pluck said, "Either do I. I will gladly hear your opinion and discuss it with you." Tabitha said, "I still do not like that I am leaving you alone." "I am never alone," Pluck told her. "I have GuideMa, and she will watch me." "Watch and helping you are two different things," Tabitha stated. Zenba said, "I agree." Pluck glanced at the female Femor, and then she said, "What must GuideMa do to ease your worries?" "Why are you bringing me into this?" GuideMa questioned her. Pluck smirked but kept quiet. "Tell us, one who follows Duke Gamemnon," Fairah began. "How shall ye safeguard my daughter while we are gone?" GuideMa immediately felt intimidated by the Immortal Woman as she spoke to her with such fierceness and yet such love for the one she called her daughter. GuideMa began, "I..." "Yes, tell us, Aviatrix of Duke Gamemnon," Zenba chimed in. "Tell us how you will protect my friend while we are gone." "I..." GuideMa stammered again as the female KellyZing folded all four of her arms and glared at her with this intense look of *I'll hurt you if you let my friend come to any harm*. "Speak, Femor," Tabitha ordered her. "Tell us how you will lay down your life to save Alba." "I... I will do no such thing!" GuideMa yelled. "The only life I will lay my own down for is my duke's life!" She turned, glared at the Woman, and demanded, "Why do you remain quiet? Say something." "It is nice for once not to be the one who everyone is up against," Pluck replied. "I am trying to heal. I shouldn't be stressed." "So it is fine that I am the one stressed," GuideMa grumbled, and then she added

to her complaints with several irritated clicks. "It will be fine," Pluck told the others. "GuideMa will watch over me, and she will promise to open the door and yell out in the hallway for some help if I should need any. Go on, GuideMa, tell them you will at least do this." "Infuriating Woman," GuideMa muttered. "I promise to open the door and..." She lowered her voice and grumbled, "...whisper..." She returned her voice to normal and finished with, "...into the hallway for some help. There... Are you satisfied?" "No, but it will have to do," both Tabitha and Zenba chimed out. The two females looked at one another, and then they both giggled. "Please leave," GuideMa said. "You two are both making me ill." Zung, Zenba, Fairah, and Tabitha said their goodbyes to Pluck, and then they along with Groth left the room. Out in the hallway... Groth met Tabitha as she left the room, and her Roth bodyguard informed her, "I have heard back from King Malodor." "What did my father have to say?" Tabitha inquired as the other three continued on their way toward the meeting room. "He has given me permission to gift you with the knowledge of what a servir truly is. Cultures outside of the Roth Culture see the role of a servir as the role of a slave. We are not slaves or servants. We are guardians, and we are guardians bound to one. I was bound to your father, and then your father requested of me that I be bound to you. I agreed. When I was bound to your father, King Malodor, I was very young but still at an age where I understood my responsibility and accepted it. You and Gamemnon did a dishonor to the servir way of life when you inducted the Woman into our ancient order." "The Roths must hate Man as much as the Necroms do," Tabitha spoke. "It was not the dishonor that I spoke of," Groth informed her. "We Roth do not hate Man. The Necroms, for the most part, are alone in their hatred of Man. The dishonor I spoke of was when you forced the Woman to bow down to you as a slave, took her freedom away from her, and branded her without telling her the true meaning of the brand. You made the Woman a slave so she could save her people. Pluck is more bound to them as a servir than to you and that is the great dishonor you cast upon our ancient order." "I understand," Tabitha spoke as the gravity of what he said sunk in. She asked, "How do I erase this dishonor from myself?" "You have to do nothing," Groth replied. "The Woman has already done so on her own by wanting to protect you and so she has become a true servir and the dishonor is no more." "But what about my dishonor?" Tabitha said. "I now feel ashamed of what I did." "At least, you didn't blame Duke Gamemnon and took responsibility for what you did. You also see that it is wrong and you want to make amends for it." She asked, "How do I make amends?" "You can start by telling the Woman that she is not a slave and the true meaning behind servir," Groth told her. "Tell Alba that she is your protector and a protector of the people." "I will," Tabitha said. "You mentioned something about the true meaning of the brand." "The brand itself is very important," Groth started to explain. "It symbolizes what the servir will protect. You gave the Woman the symbol of the Necrom and Roth Kingdoms' unity. You have given Pluck, not only the responsibility of protecting you and the Necrom Kingdom, but she also has the responsibility of protecting the Roth Kingdom." Tabitha thought about what she had done, and she said, "It might have been easier for Alba to have been my slave. What I meant to say was... I have placed a large burden on her that she doesn't even know she has." "She is a Serviatrix candidate. I believe she understands all too well what sort of burden has been placed upon her," Groth said, and then he asked, "Do you understand the burden that has been placed upon you as one of the other Serviatrix candidates?" "No, but I am starting to understand," Tabitha answered. "We better go to the meeting while I think over everything that you have told me." "Let me add one more thing for you to ponder," Groth stated. "You should know that there

is an oral prophecy passed down through the line of servirs. When we first join the order, we are tasked with memorizing it.” “Go on. Tell me what it is.” Groth quoted, “A servir shall rise amongst the servirs. This safeguarder of truth and focus will also be an uniter. A malicious brand will mark this servir with shame but this mark will unite two kingdoms under a banner of many brands and many kingdoms. Heed this servir for a time will come when they call upon those bound to safeguard to rise up and safeguard all. A sign shall appear in all the hearts of the Roth Kingdom. You shall be drawn to this servir... this Serviatrix by a need to protect her.” Tabitha admitted, “I feel a need to protect Alba.” Groth told her, “Then protect her.” Tabitha spoke again as if she couldn’t believe it herself, “I feel a need to protect Alba.” “I have had this same feeling,” Groth stated. “But what about my place as the true Serviatrix?” she questioned. “If I protect Alba, am I not saying that she is the true Serviatrix?” “I can’t answer that,” he told her. “You must follow your own heart.” Tabitha ordered, “Come, we have a meeting to attend to and I have much much to ponder.” He nodded and followed her as he added, “You should know that I also have this same strong feeling to protect you. You both need protecting. And I will lay down my life if need be to save either of you.” “I would prefer that you live. Live and protect me,” Tabitha told him. “And that is an order.”

Chapter Four

Rest Or Restrain

In Pluck’s residence...

GuideMa waited until the others left, and then she said, “You did not need for all three of them to go to the meeting so that you could hear each of their opinions.” “Four,” Pluck corrected. “I sent four of them away so that I could rest and...” “And what?” GuideMa questioned when the Woman didn’t finish. Pluck answered, “I need to speak with you.” “Why do you need to speak with me?” “You are the Watcher and... I imagine you will be going wherever I go, and I believe I need to return to Malus.” “Why would you do a thing like that before he comes for you?” GuideMa questioned her. “Why would you do a thing like that when he nearly killed you?” “I have become useless,” Pluck began to explain. “I need to find a way to rid myself of this choker.” “What of your agreement with Malus?” “I gave him my life and he didn’t take it. The life he bound to himself was not part of the agreement, so I believe I have fulfilled my end of the bargain.” “He actually took your life,” GuideMa corrected her. “You have fulfilled your end of the bargain. Your life is yours again.” “I need to return to the Shadow and maybe learn of a way to release myself of this choker.” GuideMa asked her, “What of Votar? Did he not go in search of the same solution?” “What do you mean? Votar is not here?” “The Duke of Shangra has left and taken his advisor with him,” GuideMa replied. “So he has left and taken Nirva with him,” Pluck mumbled to herself. “Votar hasn’t told me what he is up to.” GuideMa informed her, “I heard they also called back Quip and Staunch and Votar has taken them alone.” “Do you know where they have gone?” The Femor shook her head. “I wish he would have spoken to me more about this.” “You mean like you have told him over and over about your own plans?” GuideMa

questioned her. "Point taken." "Do you not wish to travel with the others as they look for more of the Serviatrix Prophecies?" GuideMa inquired. "More than anything I would like to continue with them as they travel, not because they are looking for these prophecies but because it gives me an opportunity to spend time with everyone." "Explain what you mean by this," GuideMa requested as she moved from the wall to the foot of her bed. "I feel as though I am wasting my time searching for words when action needs to be taken," Pluck began. "The Shadow are striking against the people of Wellspring. They must be stopped. I need to take on my role as the Serviatrix, not doubt that I am her. I believe looking for these prophecies are only causing fractures within the three camps. We need to band together and fight the Shadow and the Cursed." "I believe I understand," GuideMa stated. "I also have been listening to what you have been saying, False One." "I believe that is the first time you have called me, False One, to my face." GuideMa told her, "It is the title you have seized." "I will continue to hold on to it," Pluck stated. "Now turn away from me." "Why do you want me to do a thing like that?" "I wish to get up, and I know you will not help me, but I do not want you mocking me as I struggle to do so," Pluck spoke. GuideMa sighed, then turned, and faced away. Pluck slowly sat all the way forward, and it was more work than she imagined, but she managed to pull herself to a sitting position. Pluck threw the covers off of herself and attempted to move to the edge of the bed. It was much more work than sitting up. "This is ridiculous," GuideMa complained as she turned around and saw the Woman hadn't even made it to the edge of the bed. "Don't look and don't make fun of me." "I wasn't making fun of you," GuideMa spoke as she walked around the bed to her side. "I am only saying this is ridiculous. I can help you stand." "Stand so that you can quickly walk away from me and I crash to the floor like some felled tree? Or Stand so that you can push me and I still crash to the floor like some Dreadgon-felled tree?" "Neither," GuideMa replied as she helped the Woman to the edge of the bed and then to her feet. The Femor slowly assisted her as Pluck walked around and then into the next room of her residence, and GuideMa added, "I plan to walk you to the window first before I do any pushing." "The couch please," Pluck spoke as she reached out for it as if she could touch it. "I need to sit unless you want to carry me to the window." GuideMa helped her sit down, and Pluck felt as if she had run a zoc while carrying a Dreadgon on her back. "I am weaker than I thought." "What did you expect after the life was ripped from your body and then shoved back in?" "Did you actually see my life leave like some spirit?" Pluck questioned her. "No, there was no visible manifestation of your life force but there was a blast of some sort," GuideMa replied. "I guess what I am trying to say is hard to explain." "And you did well to explain you have no idea what you saw," Pluck stated. "Why did you want to know?" "I was just curious," Pluck answered. "I wasn't sure if there would be." She put a hand to her stomach and said, "I am famished now. GuideMa, go fetch me something to eat." The Femor folded her arms and glared at the Woman. "I thought I would at least try," Pluck spoke. "Could you go open the door and yell for someone?" "This place is larger than TowerRoth Citadel. I doubt anyone would hear me even if I screamed." "Hey... Why did you say you would help me if something should happen to me by opening the door and yelling for help?" GuideMa replied, "Because I already knew no one would come and assist you." Pluck chuckled, and then she said, "You really do hate me." GuideMa made a face as if she didn't like what the Woman had just said, and Pluck noticed her displeased expression. A few mites of silence fell between them, and then GuideMa out of the blue said, "I still need to tell you what transpired while you stood on the Throne of Kroth." Pluck winced as if the knowledge would somehow hurt her, and

then she said, "I am growing afraid of what I will hear now that it has taken you so long to tell me. Maybe you should hold off some more. I do not know if I can take hearing... whatever news you need to tell me. I am still very tired and famished." GuideMa thought back to when she stood at Duke Gamemnon's side within his DraKa and the Woman had just left them to face the Shadow alone. GuideMa felt deeply ashamed for allowing her loyalty to Gamemnon to keep her from... she wasn't sure what he had kept her from. GuideMa just felt that she needed to be at the side of the Woman when the Shadow attacked. "I will delay only once more in telling you and then I must," GuideMa informed her. "What sort of food would you like?" "I don't know. I feel like I could eat a DraKa," Pluck answered, and then she noticed the Femor's horrified look, so Pluck added, "Not that I would eat a DraKa." "It is taboo for an Aviatrix to eat a DraKa." "I'm not an Aviatrix. Remember I'm the Serviatrix." "I thought you were the False One." Pluck said nothing for a few moments, and then she answered the Femor's original question, "Something light but lots of it." "I will see what I can scrounge up," GuideMa complained. "Somehow I've become a servir to a servir." She went and grabbed the Woman's sword and leaned the Lux against the couch. "I should not be gone long if I can find the kitchen and my way back and if I don't decide to eat before I return. I find that I am also very hungry." GuideMa left with a bit of grumbling.

Elsewhere within the room for the meeting...

Gamemnon pulled Tabitha off to the side and spoke with her, "I did not get a chance to speak with you after the Shadow attacked our convoy." "Much was going on," Tabitha replied. "Much is still going on." "I will be quick," he told her. "I only wanted to mention that you wanted a sign." "What are you talking about? A sign for what?" "You wanted a sign to prove that you are the Serviatrix and that you are no coward and now you have one," Gamemnon answered. "You fought against the Shadow and you saved us all... and this proves you can save all of Wellspring." "I was looking for a sign," Tabitha said as she glanced at her Roth bodyguard. "We must seize this opportunity," Gamemnon told her. "We must convince everyone to rally behind you so that we can—" SoarOn clapped to get the attention of those gathered, and then he said, "It looks like everyone is here." Everyone quieted and gathered around him, and then he said, "The first thing I would like to relay is that we did find a prophecy from the Immortals of Man. I have told Fairah of it and now I will relay it to all of you. This is what a Krystallos Barasingha told us." SoarOn relayed the prophecy to the group. The room was quiet and then the Duke of Torlawn was the first to speak. "The Serviatrix can only depend on herself," Gamemnon said. "It sounds like—" Tad and JuJu entered, and Tad said, "Please forgive our tardiness. We were told incorrectly and wound up in the wrong room." Tad looked around and added, "It looks as if ye have already started." "I have only told them of the prophecy," SoarOn said. "Forgive me for starting without ye two." Zenba leaned to her brother as they fluttered in the air and said, "I thought SoarOn said everyone was here. Without Votar, Nirva, Quip, and Staunch, how could he not tell that everyone was not here?" "Age?" Zung replied. "The Immortals are quite old." He waited for his sister to react, and then Zung questioned the Immortal Egle, "Did you say that you saw a Krystallos Barasingha? I thought they were only a myth or long extinct." "We did speak with one," Tad replied. "The Krystallos Barasingha said that they had only gone into hiding." JuJu commented, "Sounds like some of us Immortals." Zenba let out a chuckle as she uttered, "Age, I get it now. Age because the Immortals are really really old." "Did you all not hear what was said about the False One?" Gamemnon questioned everyone, letting his previous interrupted

statement remain unsaid. "SoarOn said we needed to beware of the False One for she shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief. The Shadow shall strengthen themselves and fracture at the same time. The Shadow shall rally behind the False One for the False One shall reveal what had been concealed and forgotten. We should not listen to anything this Woman has to say. She has already sided with the Shadow." "How can you say that?" Zenba questioned. "She nearly died... she did die saving us." Sabrina said, "I, for one, do not trust this Woman. She cannot sway me to her way of thinking..." She glanced at Tabitha and finished with, "...unlike others I will not mention." Tabitha felt like yelling at her, but she kept her temper in check. Gamemnon said, "This one, who is not the true Serviatrix, has a point. Many here have already been swayed by her. The Duke Of Shangra has been bewitched by her and is off searching for a way to free her instead of searching for a way to free Wellspring from the Cursed and the Shadow. She could already be in league with the Shadow." "Pluck is not here to defend herself," JuJu spoke up. "All she would do is lie to us," Gamemnon stated. "I say we cast her from our group before she can do any more damage to this alliance we have." Sabrina said, "Alliance. I am not allied with any of you." The group began to argue amongst themselves.

Back in Pluck's residence...

Pluck found that she was tired again, so while she waited on the Femor, who she hoped would return with food, Pluck lay on the couch and fell asleep. She woke sometime later with a start. It felt like someone was there with her. "GuideMa..?" No one answered, and the presence she felt was dark and foreboding. "Malus..?" "He is not with me," Abhora replied as she stepped from the darkness of a corner. Pluck started to rise to her feet and grab the Lux that leaned on the couch next to her but found she couldn't even sit up. "Stay where you are, False One. I know you have no strength within you. I would not have come if I thought you could strike me down." Pluck questioned her, "Why are you here?" "I have come to see you without Malus by your side," Abhora replied. "The Shadow Necrom keeps secrets from me, and I wanted to see if I could discover one of these secrets." From her lying position, Pluck went to grab the Lux, but Abhora used her power and hurled a vase from a nearby table and knocked the sword far away from her. The Shadow Femor moved close enough she could use her Maag-neg on the False One. Pluck wanted to flee from her, but she was too weak to do so. Abhora stretched forth her hand and waved it over the False One, searching for the Maag-llee she had sensed since their meeting in the Valley of Blood. It didn't take her long to discover part of the truth. The False One's face flickered under the power of Maag-neg, and Abhora saw the image of another race. The Shadow Femor withdrew her power and stepped back from the couch. "I believe I have discovered a secret. You are not a Necrom. You are a Woman!" Abhora uttered with malicious glee, and then she laughed. "Lord Caliber has hinted as much when we speak after I have mated with him. The man toys with me because he finds pleasure in it, but Malus hides this from me because he is afraid of how the other Shadow Necroms will react. How some of the Shadows will react?" "How do you know he was even keeping such a thing from you?" Pluck asked her. "I watch him while he sleeps. I feed on fears, and I feed while others sleep," Abhora answered. "Care to dream, False One? I am a little peckish." "There must be another reason you are here other than you are hungry," Pluck spoke as she glanced at the door, concerned GuideMa might return at any time. Abhora noticed her concerned look toward the door, so she hurried their conversation and answered, "I am here to sway you to join us. I can offer you so much if you will

only side with us." "I need nothing from the Shadow," Pluck replied. Abhora told her, "I can offer you so much if you will only forsake those you find of importance." "Can I forsake myself?" Pluck questioned as if it was her answer. "I can offer you so much if you will only do nothing against us." "Can I only stand by and watch the Shadow and the Cursed destroy everything?" Abhora inquired of her, "What will it take to break you?" "I am fragile," Pluck told her. "Your answers don't make sense," Abhora snapped at her. "I should just destroy you where you lie." "Why haven't you?" Pluck inquired of her. "Why is it so important that I join you? Why did Malus give me my life back?" "He didn't give you your life back," Abhora explained. "He only put it back in its vessel. Malus still owns your life." "Is there a way from me to retake my life and make it my own again?" "So there is something that you want," Abhora spoke. "I can use this. When you have rested enough, False One, return to us, and I will tell you how you can regain your life." The Shadow Femor started to leave, and Pluck called after her, "Wait." "What is it?" "I can only rest if I know that you will leave this place and not hurt or speak with anyone else. Promise me you will leave and not hurt or speak with anyone." Abhora questioned her, "Do you believe the word of a Shadow?" "Malus said a Shadow's word is true and that the Shadow never break their word," Pluck spoke, and then she questioned, "Did he lie?" "He did not. I will promise not to hurt anyone here, but why do you not want me to speak with anyone? Are you keeping secrets from the others?" "I guess I am," Pluck replied. "I will also not speak with anyone," Abhora said and waved her hand about herself and in a puff of inky-black smoke, she disappeared. Moments later, the door opened, and GuideMa returned. "You would not believe what I went through just to have a sandwich made for you," GuideMa shouted from the other room as she entered. "I had two sandwiches made for you, but I ate one on the way." Pluck tried to hide the fact that the Shadow Femor had been there and that she had put her through a frightful ordeal, so she said, "You didn't have to tell me. I wouldn't have known you had two sandwiches made for me." "I wanted you to know because of the ordeal I went through. I wanted you to know what I had to take to compensate for all my hardship." "What kind of sandwich is it?" Pluck questioned as she realized she was in some sort of pain that she didn't have before Abhora did whatever she did to her. GuideMa replied, "It is some sort of cheese with some sort of tangy spread along with a garden full of vegetable slices. It is very good. If you don't want your sandwich, I could eat it for..." Pluck peered at the Femor as she stared at her, and then GuideMa got this horrified look on her face. Pluck questioned her, "What is it? You look like... I don't know what you look like." "Your eyes," GuideMa began. "Your eyes are bleeding." Pluck put a hand to her face around one of her eyes and then pulled it back and saw red blood on her fingers. "I need to call for help," GuideMa said as she began to panic. "I took responsibility for you and I need to call for help." "No, don't," Pluck called after her. "I will be fine." "Fine! Your eyes are bleeding. You are not fine!" "Abhora was here," Pluck said. "I don't want to upset the others." "Upset them!" GuideMa continued to yell. "I'm upset but the others will be... they will be... I was supposed to watch over you." "Please, don't be upset," Pluck told her. "It wouldn't have matter who stayed behind. I would have still wanted to eat." "You and your stomach," GuideMa complained as if it was to blame. "We need to tell the others. A Shadow is on the grounds." "Abhora promised me she would leave and not hurt anyone." "You believe the word of a Shadow!" "Why are you yelling at me?" "I am yelling..." GuideMa began. "...because you are hurt, I feel responsible, and you will not let me go and get any help. At least, let me go and bring your mother to you." Pluck nodded, and GuideMa raced away. A few moments later, Pluck sighed in the silence of her residence, and

she muttered, "I am still hungry, and she took the sandwich with her." She repositioned herself on the couch so she was more comfortable. "I was so looking forward to eating it. She will probably eat it on the way to compensate herself again for the trouble I'm putting her through."

Chapter Five

A Choice Set Before

The Duke Far from the BloodGlacier Alcazar, Votar rode in one of the DraKas within the convoy as they headed away from Pluck. His body was apart from her, but his thoughts were still with her. A messenger hawk flew in and landed on Nirva's outstretched arm. He removed the paper from its leg and read it over. "What does it say?" Votar questioned him. "How is Pluck?" "She is awake and eating," Nirva replied. Staunch walked beside the DraKa and Quip road on his shoulder. They had handed off the twin Calico Winsome Kits to Kabal before they left the BloodGlacier Alcazar. They didn't need the small winged cats as they had the messenger hawks. "Are you sure that the person we are going to meet can help Pluck?" Votar asked his advisor. "My research into this area speaks of a being with great knowledge of devices that are of Maag-neg," Nirva answered. "None of the Immortals knew how to rid Pluck of her Gold Choker of Fettering, but maybe this being will know." "Is this person also an Immortal?" Votar questioned. "I do not know. There is very little known about this being except that they are known as TieTaa. No one could tell me anything about his or her appearance. I do know their location and that they have helped many people." They traveled until a nal before sundown, and then the convoy made camp. Shangra guards were position throughout the night to safeguard them, and they rose early the next morning and continued their trek. At high sun, they came to their destination. A hut that looked more like a grassy hill than a house stood before them. "We are here," Nirva said. "I will leave the majority of my guards with the DraKas to keep watch for the Shadow," Votar spoke. "I will have two guards posted at the front of the hut alone with Staunch and Quip. Nirva, you and I along with one guard will enter the hut." Everyone did as ordered, and Votar knocked on the door to the hut. "Enter," a male voice commanded him. Votar entered alone with Nirva and one guard to find someone sitting on the sandy floor before a fire. The person wore ragged clothes with a hood that concealed their face. "Sit," the person spoke as they motioned to an area on the other side of the fire. Votar and Nirva sat as the guard took a position by the entrance. "You seek something from me. You seek something no one else knows how to find." "I do," Votar replied. "I seek—" "Do not tell me," the cloaked figure said. "What are you willing to give up to truly find what you are seeking?" "What sort of payment do you require?" "A sacrifice." Nirva questioned, "What do you mean?" The cloaked figure replied, "You must sacrifice something of equal importance to gain what your heart has always wanted." Nirva said, "I do not like the sound of that." "I will do anything to save Pluck," Votar stated. "Tell me what I must do." "There is a door behind me," the cloaked figure began. "Go through it alone. Follow it to its end and then just simply choose." Votar started to stand, and Nirva grabbed him by the elbow. "I don't like this," Nirva spoke. "Something seems off." "I must do this to save Pluck," Votar said as he was desperate enough to try it. He was also wary of the

cloaked figure, so he added, "I will be careful." Nirva warned him, "Be careful all you want but the careful rabbit can still end up in the mouth of the wolf." Votar heeded his advisor's wisdom but still proceeded to the door. He opened it and followed a dirt tunnel to its end and stopped at another door. "I am here," Votar yelled, and then he questioned, "What do I do?" "Take one thing from the room and only one thing," the cloaked figure answered and their voice could be heard as if they stood in the tunnel with him. Votar opened the door and entered a small dirt cave with beams of sunlight here and there scantily penetrating through the roots and dirt. He could barely see, but then a light appeared that wasn't sunlight and shown down on another door and on what looked like a gold key hanging from the doorknob by a gold chain. Votar headed for it when another light also not of sunlight appeared and shown down on something sitting in a chair. The new person wore a dress, was of the Necrom race, and had a veil that concealed her face. "Who are you?" Votar questioned her. "I am your temptation," she replied. "Pick me or the key. Only one of us can go with you." "Why are you a temptation?" he questioned her. "I am someone you lost, someone you have been looking for, and someone who hurt you very deeply." Votar recognized the voice, and he said, "You can't be her." "Why can't I?" "You can't be here," he said angrily. "You can't be here of all places. Why would you be here? You are some sort of trick." "I am," she admitted. "You came with a purpose, and I am here to divert you from your purpose." "No! How can you reappear to me now? Where have you been all of this time?" Votar angrily shouted and then in a tender voice, he asked, "Is it really you?" "Do you remember the first time we kissed?" she questioned him. "I do." "We were under a pear tree and saw two birds as they nestled in a nest together. You proclaimed your love for me, and I, my love for you. We kissed and then you vowed to make me your wife." "Bella!" Votar shouted as his heart exploded with memories of his past and a love he thought he would never see again. He rushed forward to lift the veil. "Do not come near me!" she screamed. "Touch me and I will disappear!" He froze in place as if breathing would cause her to vaporize from his sight. She told him, "You have a choice to make. Take the key and unlock what you came to free or pick me." "Lift your veil and let me see that it is you," he requested. "I can't. You must choose without seeing." "Lift your veil and let me see that it is you," he pleaded with her as Votar thought of Pluck and the grievous decision he must make. "I can't, and I will no longer entertain this request of yours. I will simply leave so choose before I go." Votar asked, "Are you really Bella, the one I have always loved?" "Pick me and take me with you," she spoke without answering him. "Pick me and I might just disappear as you re-emerge from this place. Pick me and we can be reunited." Votar looked to the gold key and asked, "Will that item free Pluck from her choker?" "I don't know who this Pluck is or why you are trying to free her from a choker but the key will do what it was meant to do. The key is what you are actually seeking." "Are you really her that I have lost? Are you really—" "Do not say my name again," she shouted. "It has such power over me. Do not call out my name unless you have decided to choose me." "I chose you long ago. Why did you leave me?" "I was afraid as I am afraid now," she replied. "What will you do? I have told you all that I can. Pick me and I can tell you all that you want to know. Pick the key and free the one you came to free. I will speak to you no more until you have decided and selected what thing you will have." "Thing..?" he repeated. Votar turned his attention to the gold key and thought of Pluck and the love he had for her. The key could free her from the Shadow, the key would free her from Malus. He turned to the veiled-one sitting in the chair, the one he loved since he was a child or was it her? Maybe all of this was a trick. Maybe this was only a test to see if he was

worthy to take the key. Maybe some fiendish monster or even a Shadow or a Cursed sat there tempting him. He agonized over his decision. He would not help Pluck if he chose the veiled-one. The key was a sure choice. Votar peered at the one he believed to be Bella and his heart ached. He would regret whatever decision he made, and he moved forward to select...

Sometime later...

Votar rode in a DraKa alone as he pondered over the choice he made. He even requested that Quip and Staunch walk beside another DraKa on their journey back. Nirva rode in a DraKa with several of Shangra Guards. He had been tasked with a very important mission. Nirva was to guard and jailor the veiled-one sitting within the Howdah. She had not spoken, but Votar said their guest was female. Nirva wasn't sure who this person was or how they could free Pluck from her chains that bound her to the Shadow. Maybe this person had some sort of magic like the Immortals. Maybe this person was an Immortal. Nirva only knew one thing... he didn't like the silence that came back with his duke.

* * *

An area just outside of the BloodGlacier Alcazar...

Inky black smoke appeared out of an explosion, and Abhora emerged and walked among the Shadow who camped near a cliff that looked over a great gorge filled with part of the BloodGlacier. Lord Caliber and Avarice along with the few Morgog soldiers that were left and had journeyed with the Shadow in pursuit of the False One. They had been instructed to stay out of the small skirmish the Shadow had with the False One. "Where have you been?" Lord Caliber questioned the Shadow Femor. Malus spoke up, "I would also like to know the answer to that." "I wanted to speak with the False One and I have done so," Abhora answered. "How is she?" Malus inquired, and then he spoke, "I mean to say... is her body harmed." He lifted his Constraining Dagger and said, "I have very rarely taken a life onto myself and then returned it." "She was very weak," Abhora replied, toying with the Shadow Necrom as she usually found pleasure in doing. "I found her all alone and easily approached her. I also had no problems using my Dream-Eater Maag-neg on her." Malus growled out, "Did you hurt her! Pluck is mine!" "I only feasted a little," Abhora answered. "She still breathes, though..." She glanced at her lover from those of Man and said, "The False One is so weak... anyone could easily kill her." Malus exploded with rage and roared, "She is mine! Anyone who harms her will meet their end by my fangs and claws!" "You are in a foul mood today," Abhora spoke. "I usually like your foul moods but not this one. It almost seems as if there is a hint of concern within your rage." She warned him, "Do not get attached to the False One, depending on whose side she sides with, I might need to kill her." "Her life is mine," Malus spoke with more control of his anger. "If her life must be taken, it will be me who takes it. No one else or I will take their life." "I believe we have spoken enough about the False One," Abhora said. "How goes our preparations?" "I have one more thing I must do," Malus told her. "And then everything should be in place." "You should go now and do this thing," Abhora instructed him. "I do not like waiting."

* * *

Back at the BloodGlacier Alcazar...

The group within the meeting room continued to argue amongst themselves over Pluck and her role of the False One and a leader who would lead many astray. Gamemnon said, "I say again that we shouldn't trust this Woman." Kabal spoke, "I believe my brother should have a say in this. We should wait until he returns before we do anything." "We can't wait," Gamemnon said. "As I said before, Votar has been bewitched by her and is off searching for a way to free her instead of searching for a way to free Wellspring from the Cursed and the Shadow. The Woman could already be in league with the Shadow." "Let me say again..." JuJu tried to speak over the other voices in the room. "Pluck is not here to defend herself." "I don't want to hear what the lying Woman has to say," Gamemnon stated. "I say we cast her... no, I say we destroy her before she can do any more damage to this alliance we have." Sabrina muttered, "Alliance..? There you go using that word again. I am not allied with any of you." Tabitha yelled, "You will do nothing to Alba." She glanced at Groth, and then Tabitha added, "She is my servir." Fairah had been quiet this entire time, and then she said, "JuJu is correct. We should not have this meeting without Pluck. We should not speak any more until she can attend, and we should also wait for Votar's return. The Duke of Shangra and Nirva should also hear what is said here, so I suggest that we adjourn this meeting until all parties can attend." Fairah turned and left, and SoarOn followed after her, and JuJu followed after them some time later. She entered the hallway and started for Pluck's residence. "Fairah," SoarOn called after her. She paused and waited for him to catch up. "Ye are angry," he said. "I am," Fairah replied. "Did ye not hear what they were saying about Pluck?" "I did hear." "She is not this False One," Fairah insisted. "Pluck shall not lead us astray." "Us..?" "I guess I never asked ye," Fairah began. "Who do ye follow?" "I do not know who the true Serviatrix is," SoarOn admitted. "Are ye taking no side?" "I shall side with Pluck until I see another that I should side with," he replied. "I do have a question for ye. If Pluck ends up being this False One, shall ye still follow her as the False One?" She considered his question, and then Fairah answered, "She is my daughter." "A daughter ye did not give birth to," he said, and then SoarOn realized what he also implied and said, "I did not mean it that way. I know ye's desire to have ye's own daughter and give birth." "I have always had this desire as do most females. It is one thing we Immortals cannot have." "And yet ye found a way to have a daughter, but is she truly ye's daughter? How well do ye know this Pluck?" "As well as I know ye," she replied. "Ye have such a good heart," SoarOn spoke as he raked a claw through her shimmering white hair. "But can one truly know another?" "I know Pluck. I know that she cannot be this deceiving False One." "But she has already said that she is this False One," SoarOn spoke. "I do not think she understands what she speaks. If Pluck knew that the False One would lead others astray..." "What would she do?" SoarOn inquired when Fairah didn't finish. "Would she forsake the Serviatrix mission? Would she embrace the role as the False One? Would she—" "I do not wish to speak on this subject any further. I need to return to my daughter's side." "Then let me ask ye my other question again. Will ye journey with me? I will be leaving shortly to search out the remaining Immortals." "Why do ye keep asking me this question?" Fairah inquired of him. "Why have ye not gone on ye's journey?" "I am waiting on ye to join me. I am waiting for ye to want to journey with me forever." "Ye are asking me two questions then," Fairah spoke as she smiled. "I am. Do ye have an answer for either?" Fairah replied, "Not yet." He wished for an answer but was patient enough to wait on one, so he said, changing the subject, "I want to give ye something. I want to give ye something that has taken me nearly my entire existence to accomplish. I have slowly been storing up some power. I—" "Fairah!" GuideMa shouted as she

ran through the hallway. "Come quickly. It is Pluck!" The Immortal Woman turned from him and started to race away, but SoarOn grabbed her by her wrist. She turned to him, and he said, "What I told ye is of great importance to me. Come find me later. I wish to give ye this gift, and it would be very appropriate for me to give it to ye this sun's cycle." Fairah nodded, and he released her. Fairah rushed over to the Femor and sometime later, GuideMa returned to Pluck's residence with Fairah, and Fairah immediately rushed over to her daughter. Pluck was asleep on the couch, so Fairah gently woke her. "Fairah..." Pluck spoke as she rolled over. She smiled and said, "I am glad you are here." Pluck couldn't see past her mother, so she asked, "Is GuideMa with you?" "She is," Fairah replied. "She has done a terrible thing," Pluck told her mother. The Immortal Woman turned to the female Femor, and GuideMa immediately felt guilty for some unknown reason. Maybe the Woman was blaming her for leaving her alone. Fairah turned back to her daughter and asked, "What terrible thing has she done?" "You see..." Pluck began. "I was hungry so GuideMa went to bring me back something to eat and she did, but then she told me she had two sandwiches for me but she ate one. I was so sad when I heard that. I was so hungry." "Is this the terrible thing that GuideMa did?" Fairah questioned. "No, something more terrible than that happened," Pluck answered. "First, I must know, did GuideMa tell you why she summoned you back?" "She did," Fairah answered. "A Shadow Femor appeared and did something to ye." Fairah stroked her hand over her daughter's head to ease whatever burden she was about to tell her about GuideMa, and then Fairah said, "Tell me what terrible thing GuideMa did and I will punish her according to the transgression." "She has been so wicked," Pluck stated as if it was so hard for her to reveal this terrible deed. "At first, I didn't want her to tell anyone that Abhora had been here but she insisted. I finally agreed to have her go and get you and that is when she did this terrible thing." "Tell me what she did and I will strike her down where she stands," Fairah vowed as she imagined so many horrible things the Aviatrice of Duke Gamemnon might have done to her daughter. "You see, in her haste..." Pluck spoke very weakly. "GuideMa took the second sandwich with her when she left to retrieve you. I am so very very hungry. I am so afraid that she ate the sandwich to compensate herself again for the trouble I put her through." She paused and then started to ask, "GuideMa, have you brought my sandwich, the one with cheese and some tangy sauce on it with—" "You wretched wicked thing!" GuideMa yelled at her. "I thought I did something terrible to you! I thought you were worse off than you let on before. You made me believe that I really hurt you in some way!" "Don't be mad," Pluck spoke as she slowly sat up. "I'm not as tired as I was before. I'm very very hungry but not as tired." "I am mad!" "I'm sorry," Pluck said as if hiding a chuckle. "I didn't mean to tease you." "Of course you meant to tease me. You are a wretched wicked thing!" Fairah started to laugh, and then she said, "My daughter is a wretched wicked thing. Ye also had me so worried. I nearly murdered the Femor." "Oh..." Pluck said. "I thought you were also only teasing. Would you have really murdered GuideMa?" "Let us not ponder on things that might have been," Fairah replied. "Let—" "You mean you would have," GuideMa spoke over the Immortal Woman. "Let us worry about making ye stronger," Fairah finally finished. "GuideMa, do ye have Pluck's sandwich?" GuideMa looked at her empty hand and said, "I did eat it. I was so worried... I was in such a hurry, I didn't realize I had." "No matter," Fairah said. "But I'm still hungry," Pluck whined like some child. Fairah consoled her daughter as if she was only three-seasons-old and not a grown woman by saying, "I had GuideMa's friend go and procure something special for ye before the meeting started." GuideMa repeated, "My friend? Who are you talking about?" "Actually," Fairah continued talking without answering the

Femor. "He has told me that he has returned." She turned and said, "GuideMa, please go and let him in." GuideMa went over to the door and opened it, and the young Giant Lunar Flytrap came in. He immediately went over to the Immortal Woman. Fairah held out her hand to him and asked, "Do ye have the item?" The Lunar Flytrap started to hack like a choking dog, and then he regurgitated what looked like a slimy yellow-orange skinned pomegranate onto the Immortal Woman's outstretched hand. Fairah winced at the mess and slime. "If that is for me, I think I'm full," Pluck spoke. "Non-sense," Fairah told her. "Ye must eat it. Ye shall regain ye's energy." Pluck peered at what looked like vomit and said, "No, that's fine. I feel much much better and am not hungry in the least." GuideMa started laughing. "Ye must eat this," Fairah insisted. "It is a very special fruit. GuideMa..." The Immortal Woman waved the fruit at the Femor, slinging some of the slime on her, "Take this and wash this. Pluck must eat this." GuideMa started to say, "I am not going to—" Fairah turned and glared at her. GuideMa remembered what the Immortal Woman had said earlier about murdering her, so GuideMa immediately moved forward, took the slime-covered fruit, and went in search of some water. Pluck asked, "What is the fruit?" "It is a Heart Pomegranate," Fairah answered. "It is very rare shrub with an even rarer fruit, but Giant Lunar Flytraps have a knack for finding them," she spoke as she petted the flytrap's head, who in turn, rubbed up against her hand as he enjoyed the affectionate treat. "The Heart Pomegranate is called so for each individual bead or what is called an aril that is inside the fruit beats like a heart when it is at its ripest and at its peak for the health benefits." "And eating them," Pluck added as she remembered the disgusting condition the Giant Lunar Flytrap had brought back the fruit. GuideMa returned, drying off the free of slime fruit, and she gave the yellow-orange pomegranate to the Immortal Woman a little afraid to go near Pluck in case the Immortal Woman still had murderous intentions for her. "Thank ye," Fairah said as if she had never implied any ill intentions toward the Femor. She held the fruit in her hand and then using her Maag-lee, she opened the ripe fruit with a simple command, "Open up." The Heart Pomegranate split open, and little bright-red pearl-like pieces of flesh came floating out of it. Pluck peered at the line of tiny round fruit that was beating like tiny hearts. The line of fruit reminded her of a time when she was younger and lived within the temple that housed the Mystic Rose. Fairah had fed her in a similar way. Back then, Fairah still had her ghostly form and couldn't touch anything with her hands. Pluck smiled and opened up, and a few of the pieces floated into her mouth. The aril continued to beat even in her mouth, and she ate them. "These are good," Pluck said. "Sweet and yet sour at the same time." "Eat all of this fruit and it will help ye reestablish ye's connection to ye's body." "Am I disconnected from my body?" Pluck questioned her mother. "Ye's life force was disconnected from ye's body forcefully and so the connections are well... strained. The Heart Pomegranate shall help along the healing process along with my added Maag-lee, and ye should be back to one's self no later than tomorrow." Pluck continued to eat up her assembly line fruit as the bright-red beads pulsed in a rhythmic beat to a sound they only seemed to hear. Pluck realized how much time had gone by, and she started to ask, "The Hamarr concert—" "When GuideMa told me what the Shadow Femor had done to ye, I told Shamarr, who happened past us, that ye would wait and attend the evening performance." Pluck wondered if the beads were in rhythm with the Hamarr Melody which they must be singing by now. Fairah noticed her daughter's disappointed look, and she added, "Shamarr said that ye did not have to wait until this evening to hear the Hamarr. They would set up a special engagement just for you and any other who wanted to attend." Pluck's face

brightened which caused her mother to smile. Pluck said, "I imagine GuideMa will at least go with me. She has been talking up a storm about how much she wants to listen to them." "I have said no such thing," GuideMa stated. "But I would not mind going and hearing their songs again." "See..." Pluck said. "Talking up a storm." Pluck continued to eat the bright-red fruit pieces and a few mites later as the last of the Heart Pomegranate floated in line toward her, Fairah spoke up. "Tomorrow, I would like to start ye's lesson in the use of the Mystic Rose. We shall start small and work slowly." "Maybe we could start now," Pluck suggested as she eyed the last twelve pieces of floating fruit. Fairah said, "I would prefer that ye rest first." Pluck stated, "I only meant that you could verbally start explaining how I would use her." "She is like ye's Lux," Fairah spoke. "The Mystic Rose is alive and has a will of her own." "I don't actually use the Lux. He seems to know what I want to do and he assists me," Pluck explained after she ate half of what was left of the pomegranate. "The Mystic Rose is the same but she has different abilities and those abilities are what I want to teach ye," Fairah said. Pluck reached over and grabbed her hand as an urgency to speak of something she rarely talked about, and she told her mother, "Thank you. Thank you for always being there for me." Pluck realized she must have been afraid that they wouldn't have another chance to speak, so she calmed herself so that sincerity and not panic was what her mother heard as she said, "You and Han were my world for so long. The two of you were my parents." "I should be thanking ye," Fairah said in response. "I had been the guardian of the Mystic Rose for so long... Ye brought a great deal of light and joy into my world." "Don't forget about worry. I was a very curious child and could get into mischief." "I have not forgotten." Pluck wasn't sure if it was the Heart Pomegranate, the Maag-llee flowing through her, Fairah's love, or a combination of all three that made her feel so safe, secure, and loved. She was so happy that Fairah had come to Wellspring to continue her role as mentor and guide. Pluck also greatly missed Han. She thought about him and all the time she spent with him training to become a High Guard. What she wouldn't do just to spend another nal with him? Those sweet and bitter memories filled her as Pluck glanced at GuideMa. The Femor, even if it was just the slightest, also seemed to... Pluck wasn't sure, but she didn't feel hated in that instance, and she wished to exist in this moment of time forever. She went back to eating so not to be scolded by Fairah. Pluck finished all the fruit, and she noticed that GuideMa appeared to be standing in the same spot she had been after handing off the washed Heart Pomegranate to Fairah. GuideMa did seem concerned for her. Pluck assumed it was because she was afraid of what Fairah would do to her because she was hurt by Abhora while she was supposed to be watching her. Pluck's eyes drooped as she thought about everyone and her thoughts fell heavily upon Votar as she drifted asleep. Fairah set up a protective seal on the room so that any Shadow or Cursed who came near it would immediately alert her. She watched her daughter sleep for a few mites, and then Fairah left after telling the Femor to take extra special care of her daughter.

Some time later...

Pluck woke to find only GuideMa there. Pluck sat up on the couch and ate some cheese and apple slices that Fairah had brought in earlier and left for her. She wanted to know about the concert she had missed and if it could be arranged to hear it. Under protest, GuideMa went into the hallway, found a Hamarr, and made the request to him. About a nal later, a different Hamarr came with a chariot-chair. Pluck found she was strong enough to stand from the couch and sit in the chair. The Hamarr pushed her chair, and the three of them started for the BloodGlacier

Amphitheater. The BloodGlacier Amphitheater was outside but still within the Alcazar. It was cold outside the hot spring-warmed walls, so Pluck and GuideMa were both given furry robes to wear. GuideMa helped Pluck, through another protest, to get hers on. Pluck looked to the BloodGlacier Alcazar that surrounded them now that she was outside and could see part of the large structure. She saw a small section of the giant glacier of red that Votar spoke of that surrounded the fortress. She didn't see the giant spring on their travel. Maybe she would request a visit to it later. Votar had said the giant spring was in the BloodGlacier Alcazar's center where it heated the structure. She shivered. It was definitely warmer inside. They walked on in silence. It might be cold, but Pluck still admired the material the Alcazar was built out of. Votar had said that the material was called Crystox, and he was right... It looked like crystal clear silver. The Hamarr continued to push her in her chariot-chair across the path between the main structure and the BloodGlacier Amphitheater. They went through a gate in a curved wall and finally came upon the amphitheater. It was so beautiful. The amphitheater consisted of a small but very deep lake so clear that one could see all the way to the bottom. Three other paths from the three other directions entered through the other gates. The walls were rounded and formed a clear dome that the sky was visible through. Stadium seating, created out of the Crystox, encircled the area. The stadium seating went down into the lake and at the bottom, surrounded a stage where several Hamarr were already gathering. The one Hamarr wheeled Pluck to the lowest row of seats right above the water. He and GuideMa assisted her to a seat, and the Femor sat beside her. The Hamarr excused himself and then took the steps down further as he joined the choir on the stage surrounded by liquid. Pluck thought they would float about like one does when swimming, but the Hamarr stood as if they stood on the land. "This is all so amazing," Pluck spoke. "I'm in such awe and the music hasn't even started." GuideMa only nodded as she felt the same way the Woman did. Gamemnon would have enjoyed this and she wished her duke could have joined her. The last of the singers arrived on stage, and then the Hamarr moved apart and then one male and one female joined hands. The Hamarr began their performance and as they did so, they slowly moved about. The Hamarr Melody immediately enchanted Pluck. It was as beautiful as the one she heard while traveling by DraKa. The seating of the BloodGlacier Amphitheater seemed to trap the song and made it more focused on the hearer, not in a way that brought discomfort but in a way that... She felt as if Fairah's healing Maag-Ilee was upon her and it was so soothing and moving. Tears came to her eyes as the concert progressed. She thought GuideMa would make fun of her for crying, but she didn't care if she did. The songs were so soul-stirring. Pluck glanced at GuideMa and saw that the Femor was also extremely moved for a few tears were streaming down her cheeks. Pluck turned away before GuideMa saw her peering at her. She didn't want to take anything away from what they were experiencing. The concert went for nearly a nal, and then the Hamarr ceased their performance and quietly left the stage, disappearing through the back of the stage. Pluck and GuideMa sat there for over ten mites still soaking in the melody that seemed to remain even after the voices stopped singing it. Pluck waited until GuideMa suggested that they return to the room and with the Femor's help, Pluck sat in the chariot-chair, and they headed back the way they came.

Chapter Six

A Decision Made And A Heart In Turmoil

That night...

Votar and the DraKa Convoy returned to BloodGlacier Alcazar under the cover of late evening, and he immediately had Bella sent to his residence and placed under guard. He dared not remove the veil that covered her identity, fearing she was only a test and that she, Bella, was still gone from his life. A few nals went by as Votar debated what to do as he paced a different room of his residence. Should he go and see Pluck or should he see just exactly who was underneath the veil? He decided on an action and had all the guards clear the residence and stand in the hallway, and then he and Nirva walked over to the veiled-one. Votar spoke, "Who had all the curtains drawn? Open them so I may see." The veiled-one said, "Please do not. The light hurts me. I have been in the dark far too long." Votar ordered her, "Remove the veil. Let me see your face." "I cannot," she replied. "Remove the veil!" he yelled. "I want to see—" "You still have that temper of yours," the veiled-one spoke. "I only meant that I can't remove the veil. Another must remove it for me." The Duke of Shangra started toward her when Nirva said, "Please allow me, my lord." "Why should you do it?" Votar questioned. The veiled-one answered before the Advisor could, "In case it is a trick. In case there is sorcery at work here and the one who removes my veil is cursed themselves or..." She paused, and then she added, "...maybe I will appear as their heart's desire. It would be wise to allow Nirva to remove my veil." Votar turned to Nirva and nodded, and the Advisor proceeded to remove the veil. Nirva looked upon her face, and she did look like Bella as she would if she had grown older. "Is it her?" Votar questioned as he dared not move and peered upon her without knowing the truth first. Nirva stepped to the side, and Votar saw Bella. She had long red hair, light gray fur, and deep green eyes. The dress she wore was all black and dingy with wear. "You do look like her and you sound like her and you have the same mannerisms within your speech," Votar spoke. "It is because I am her," Bella said. "Or I am a very good look alike." He yelled at her, "Tell me if you are not her!" "I am her," Bella spoke so sure, but then a sense of fear came over her, and she stated, "I believe I am her." A great doubt shrouded her fear, and she started, "I am not sure—" "What happened to you?" he questioned after only hearing her affirm her identity. "You just disappeared one night." "Your father and my father had a disagreement one night and your father had the wedding canceled," Bella began. "He also made arrangements to have me whisked away. En route to a ship, my carriage was attacked by... I am not sure what. I have worn this veil ever since and have not seen much of my world, but I have heard much about it." "Did TieTaa have you captive all of this time?" Nirva questioned. "TieTaa? I have never heard such a name, but I do know that I was in a place with many many people. Surprisingly, I was also well taken care of for a captive. I had an attendant." Bella paused as she thought about her time before, and then she said, "I wish I could have her now. She was always so helpful. I never wanted for anything. I never thirst and I never hungered. I only yearned for my freedom." "You have your freedom now," Votar spoke as he had to refrain himself from rushing over to her and taking her into his arms to console her. He still wasn't sure if he had Bella back in his life and his thoughts also lingered with Pluck. "I do, don't I?" she spoke. "I wonder why I am not leaping for joy. I wonder why I have not wrapped my arms around you

and kiss you as we used to kiss.” Bella paused, and then she asked, “You have not offered. Is it because you have another? Is there another love in your life? Is this Pluck, whom you came to free, is this Pluck your new love?” Votar didn’t answer her. “I see,” Bella said. “I see after so long and now I wish not to see.” She paused, and then she said, “Why have you placed me in this room and why have you surrounded me with guards? Are you safeguarding me or are you safeguarding others from me?” He didn’t answer her again. “Is this your room? Will you be staying with me or will you leave me alone as I have been alone for so long?” Votar didn’t know how to answer her. His heart was in turmoil. “If you will not dictate what must be done, I will have to do so,” Bella told him. “The first thing you need to discover is if I am really your Bella.” Nirva asked her, “How would he go about that?” “He will have to spend time with me and—” Votar turned, left the room, and entered another. He shut the door and started pacing again in deep thought. Bella turned to the Advisor and said, “Maybe he has already decided that I am not her.” “I think he is confused,” Nirva told her. “Do you think that I am her?” “I don’t know,” Nirva answered. “Do you know who I am?” She peered at him for a long time and answered, “I don’t think so. Age would have changed you, but I don’t think I know you.” Nirva told her, “I have seen Bella, but we were never introduced.” He started out the door, and she questioned him, “Am I truly free? Can I leave this room?” “Not yet,” he answered. “Be patient with Votar. He has much that he must consider.” Nirva left her, and Bella muttered, “Have I not been patient enough?” She peered around the room that was mostly dark and whispered, “I am not free. I am only a prisoner to a new jailor.”

* * *

Fairah left her daughter in the care of GuideMa, set about a few things she needed to attend to, and then went in search of SoarOn. When an Immortal has a strong connection to another Immortal, they can find this Immortal if they are within a given area by just thinking about them. Fairah thought about SoarOn and followed her feelings to a garden he was standing in peering up at the night sky. “Ye have finally come,” he said. “Come stand with me and look how beautiful the moons are tonight.” She went over and took his clawed-hand and peered up at Auror the Greater and Array the Lesser in the clear cloudless dark sky. “They are very beautiful.” They stood there in silence for several mites, and then he asked, “If ye still believe in Pluck, ye must prepare her to fight the Shadow and the Cursed. I have seen that she has a mighty sword as the other two have mighty swords. I also sense something else about her. Could it be that she has the Mystic Rose? Ye took the Mystic Rose with ye when ye left Wellspring to journey with Man.” “Pluck does have the Mystic Rose.” SoarOn asked her, “Have ye taught her how to use the item yet?” “I have not. So much has happened... So much keeps happening.” “Ye should teach her.” “I plan on starting her training tomorrow,” she told him. “I did say ye should teach her, but ye should not rush her until she is healed from her ordeal with the Shadow.” Fairah told him, “I intend to only start verbally instructing her. I know how important it is that Pluck learn how to use the Mystic Rose, but Pluck’s welfare is just as important.” He nodded his head in approval. A few more mites went by, and then SoarOn said, “I had told ye that I wanted to give ye a gift. It is a gift I have worked my lifetime since meeting ye to give to ye.” “What sort of gift is it?” “I shall not know what sort of gift it is, but it shall grant ye’s deepest wish,” he explained. “May I give ye this gift now?” “It shall grant my deepest wish? I do not know if I should... if I should now. So much is going on.” “I can promise ye that the gift shall not interfere with what is going on now.

It is a gift, and I know it shall make ye very happy.” Fairah looked into eagle-like eyes which were light blue starlight and saw all the love that he had for her, so she nodded. SoarOn put a hand to his chest and removed a sphere of light that had been growing in his heart. He broke the sphere of light in half and put half of it into her head and the other half into her heart. Immediately, Fairah’s mind and soul were whisked away, and she sensed that she was in another land and another time. Her essence floated in some sort of wooden house above a woman that Fairah had never seen before. The image before her came more into focus, and Fairah saw that there was a man in the room also and the man slit the throat of the woman. Fairah screamed but her voice wasn’t heard by those in the room. The man stood, looked over his handy work, and left the house. Fairah gasped as she looked down at the dead woman. Why would SoarOn give her such a horrible gift? Fairah floated down to the dead woman, and she realized that the woman was pregnant. Fairah stretched out her hand, and she found that she could touch the woman and placed her hand on her stomach. The baby within was still alive but wouldn’t be so for long. Fairah knew there was nothing she could do for the baby, after all, this was only a dream... or was it? She tried to use her powers on the woman, but Fairah found that she had no powers. Fairah started to lift back up from hovering over the woman to leave the dreadful scene when a force grabbed hold of her and forced her within the body of the woman. It was very disturbing, and Fairah thought she would die with the body as these unknown sensations hit her. She didn’t die as the cut across her now throat healed itself. Fairah might not have died in a sense most mortals understand, but she did feel flesh that wasn’t immortal, flesh that felt death draw closer by each mite. She slowly became used to what it was to be mortal, and Fairah rose to her new feet and peered down at her new arms. She put a hand to her stomach. She was pregnant... She was pregnant and she was going to have a baby. Fairah remembered the man who had killed the woman and decided she couldn’t stay there, so she grabbed what supplies she could from the house and fled the town when night came. Fairah journeyed for a long time until she found a small abandoned hut deep in the woods and with her vast knowledge of plants and wildlife, Fairah was able to take care of herself and her unborn baby. Her unborn baby... She didn’t even know the mother’s name or what name the mother would have given to her child. The place she selected as her home was very peaceful and full of wildlife. Roses grew all around the hut she lived in, and they were a rare rose. Fairah also remembered seeing the roses at the woman’s home when she peered out the window. Sun’s cycles turned into weeks and weeks into months. Fairah sensed that the body... that she was about to give birth so she prepared everything for herself and went into labor. The labor was hard, but she had no difficulty giving birth and she gave birth to a girl. Fairah wrapped her baby in a blanket and sat in a rocker and peered down at the life she had given birth to. The girl was so beautiful and precious. “Thank ye, SoarOn,” Fairah spoke. “I thought at first ye’s gift was a horrible thing, but I gave this baby girl a chance at life when her life was about to be snuffed out... and ye gave me a chance to be a mother.” Time went on, and Fairah raised the baby and soon the baby girl was walking around on her own. A knock came to the door, and Fairah cautiously answered it and found a woman standing there who was a sister from one of the local churches. “Yes, how may I help ye?” “Are you, Nancy, who used to live in Olivefield?” “Olivefield,” Fairah repeated, recognizing the town as one that was within Fletching. She asked, “Why are ye looking for this Nancy?” “Queen Jezebel has a summons for your...” the sister began as she peered into the hut. “...daughter.” “Why does Queen Jezebel want to see my baby?” “The Queen is looking for a suitable playmate for her son, Prince Edward,

and..." Fairah inwardly gasped as the woman continued to talk. Fairah realized the identity of the child who she had given birth to. She turned and looked at her baby with new eyes, and she started to weep. "...and that is why Queen Jezebel has summoned—" "I am not Nancy," Fairah told her, and then she slammed the door in her face. Fairah rushed over to her daughter and picked her up in her arms and hugged her with such affection. "It is ye! I cannot believe that it is ye! I am ye's mother! I am ye's mother as much as I can be ye's mother!" She hugged and kissed on her baby and after a few mites, she heard another knock at her door. Fairah walked over to it and spoke through the door, "Who is it?" "It is still I, Sister Agnest. I see that your baby is still just that and is too young to be a playmate to anyone right now. Raise your daughter, and I shall come back in a couple of seasons. Before I go, though, what is the girl's name?" "Her name?" Fairah repeated as she had never given the girl a name. "Yes, I would like to know the girl's name before I leave." "Her name is Alba," Fairah replied, thinking of all the roses around the hut. "Her name has always been Alba." Sister Agnest left, and Fairah began to laugh and then she began to cry. She would only have two more seasons with Alba before she would be taken from her. Fairah made her daughter a doll and spent all of her time with her. Wherever she went, Alba went. The next two seasons were filled with joy, heartache, and memories and then about a month before Sister Agnest should return, Fairah felt herself become ill. The body she occupied had some sort of disease she couldn't treat with herbs or any other remedy, and soon she became bedridden. Fairah prayed Sister Agnest would return as she promised because she didn't know how much longer she could hold out in a body that had given up the fight. It was her own spirit and will that kept her from entering a realm no Immortal had experienced. She hugged and kissed on Alba while she still had the strength to say her goodbyes and when she found that she could no longer hang onto life, a knock came to the door. "Enter," Fairah managed to say. Sister Agnest came in, then rushed over to her bed, and spoke, "You look so ill. I should go and bring back a physician." "It is already too late for that," Fairah told her. "Have ye still come to take Alba to the Queen?" Sister Agnest turned to the toddler and answered, "I have come for Alba, but she is still too young to be a playmate to the prince." She didn't want Nancy to despair, so she added, "I and the other sisters will take care of her until it is time for her to take on her new duties." "Please hand her to me so I can say my final goodbyes." Sister Agnest picked up the child and set Alba beside her mother on the bed. Fairah had very little strength left, so she was only able to grab Alba's tiny hand. "Know that I love ye," Fairah began. "Know that I have always loved ye, and I shall continue to love ye. I shall see ye soon, Alba." Another sister came into the hut and took Alba from Fairah as Fairah wept. Fairah watched as her child was taken from her, and then she asked, "When ye first came upon my hut, how did ye know to even look here?" "Do you know that our order was tasked in finding the King's mistress after he passed? A sect of our order felt that the woman should be eliminated so an assassin was sent. The assassin said that he found this woman and slit her throat," Sister Agnest replied as she looked at the scar on her neck. "The assassin also said that he remained with the woman until she choked her last and there was no life left in her. The assassin was also tasked with one other assignment that he failed to accomplish. He was tasked with killing the unborn child within her. The assassin made a confession to me. He told me he couldn't kill the child as if the voice of the Creator had spoken to him. The assassin also felt that the child needed to be protected. He knew the baby would die even if he did nothing so that is what he did. I eventually heard that such a drastic measure had been ordered, so I immediately went to the house and found no body only blood. I asked

around Olivefield about you. No one mentioned your body, death, murder, or that you were even missing.” “Poor woman,” Fairah mostly spoke to herself. “To be missed by none.” She lifted her voice that was very weak and said, “It does not explain to me how ye found me.” Sister Agnest took her hand and held it in hers as she said, “I have a confession of my own to make. I lied before. I was not tasked with finding Alba. I had a dream about this hut in the deep woods. I had a dream about it three nights in a row so I came looking for it. Queen Jezebel has not requested the child of her husband’s mistress, but I have a feeling as I was led here so shall our queen be led to take in the child of her husband. Alba is Edward’s half-sister, and they should live and play together.” “Thank ye. Thank ye for coming this sun’s cycle. I did not know how much longer I could hang on.” “You should thank the Creator. I had not planned on coming for another two weeks, but I dreamed of your hut again and came with another sister. We will take care of Alba until the Queen does call for her. Are you sure that you do not want me to call for a physician?” “No, there is nothing that can be done.” “Would you like for me to stay with you until the end?” “I would like that,” Fairah told her. “Could ye get me some water?” Sister Agnest stood and started for the table when she turned back and asked, “Would you prefer some tea?” Nancy had died... and Sister Agnest paid for her burial. Alba was taken back and raised by the Sisters until Queen Jezebel summoned her.

The present...

Within the garden of the BloodGlacier Alcazar...

Fairah emerged and found she was standing in front of SoarOn. She was a little disoriented, so she questioned him, “Where am I?” “Where ye have been since I gave ye my gift.” “The gift...” Fairah thought about everything that had happened and all the joy she experienced. “Was it just a vision of my wishes?” she inquired. “No, ye actually were wherever ye were and doing all the things that ye saw and did,” he replied. “Was my gift truly a gift?” Fairah began to cry and said, “Yes, ye’s gift was truly a gift.” “Tell me what this gift was,” he requested. “I cannot just yet. I still have need to completely process it, but I shall tell ye in the future.”

* * *

Earlier that sun’s cycle...

Sabrina and her companions left the meeting in which SoarOn had told everyone of the prophecy they had discovered. The Immoral Toadian followed after them. Sabrina headed for their room when Tad hurried and walked beside her. Tad said, “I believe I missed much of the meeting.” “It would seem that someone didn’t want you there,” Sabrina spoke. “Why would ye say such a thing?” She questioned the Immortal Toadian, “Only one organized the meeting, so how could one send only two to the wrong place?” “I still say it was only a simple mistake. Why would this one ye speak of not want me or JuJu there?” “I can’t answer that question.” “Ye can at least tell me of what we missed by not being at the beginning of the meeting,” Tad requested. “The Immortal Egle only spoke of the prophecy the three of you discovered that was relayed by the Krystallos Barasingha.” “Are ye sure that was all that was spoken?” “As sure as my memory is,” Sabrina replied. “I felt as if we walked into an argument,” Tad said. “The argument or debate had just begun as you two walked in,” she stated. “Duke Gamemnon seemed to have caused

it.” Sabrina asked, “Why do you say that?” Tad replied, “He said to beware of the False One.” “He did say that but only because that is what the prophecy said, ‘Beware of the False One for she shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief,’” Sabrina relayed. “No, the prophecy was quoted as ‘Take heed for the False One shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief,’” Tad informed her. “Beware has a different meaning than take heed. Are ye sure that is how SoarOn quoted it?” “I am sure,” she replied. “We do need to beware of this False One, and she has swayed many to her way of belief.” Sabrina questioned him, “When do we take out the False One and this other false one who claims to be the true Serviatrix? I have a mission of my own to accomplish, and I need the power of the Serviatrix to do it.” “Ye have said as much to me in the past,” Tad spoke. “The Shadow and the Cursed must be dealt with first or there shall be nothing left of this world but chaos, pain, and misery.” Sabrina glanced at Macht and Ferlis. The Dreadgon and male Femor peered back at her with the same look. “I know what I must do,” Sabrina told Tad.

Chapter Seven

Hunger And Healing

Pluck woke early the next sun’s cycle and had breakfast with Tabitha and Groth. Pluck was mostly quiet as she listened to Groth tell Tabitha news of home and news from King Malodor. Tabitha even received a letter from her other father, King Solom, and Tabitha read it to the two of them. After breakfast, Pluck felt much better and took a walk with her mother. Fairah was quiet more than usual as if her thoughts were elsewhere, but Pluck didn’t press the issue. Fairah would speak to her if there was something that they needed to talk about. Fairah indeed did have a great deal on her mind. She was thinking about her time with young Alba and how she had raised her from an infant until she was about five-seasons-old. “Alba,” Fairah began. Pluck turned to her with a peculiar expression on her face. “I wish to tell ye something, but now is not the right time.” “I thought you acted like you wanted to talk. It is fine... You can tell me when you are ready,” Pluck replied, paused, glanced back at the female Femor, who had been following them from a great distance, and then she added, “Do you know GuideMa has something she also needs to tell me and is taking quite a bit of time to tell me?” “I shall not take so long,” her mother told her. “Why did you give me such a look earlier?” “You have never called me Alba before and you did.” “I did not,” Fairah insisted. “You did. It does not matter what you call me, I was only surprised.” Fairah never intended to call Pluck by her given name, a name she had given her. Her heart must still be back in those sun’s cycles long ago when life was so simple. She would have to tell Pluck of them, but she had been right. Now wasn’t the time. They continued on and enjoyed their walk. Later that sun’s cycle, Pluck ate lunch with GuideMa, Zenba, and Zung. “Zung, you said that Votar went on some sort of journey,” Pluck began while they ate out on a balcony of her residence. “When will he be back?” Zung glanced at his sister, and then Zung answered, “Duke Votar came back last night. Has he not come and seen you since his return?” “No, I haven’t heard from him or Nirva,” Pluck answered as she felt like she should go and see Votar since he hadn’t come and visited with her. “He is probably tired from his long journey. I will go and see if

he is up for a visit after our meal." The meal went on, and Pluck enjoyed her time with her friends. They finished lunch, and then Pluck went on her own to go and visit Votar. She approached Votar's residence when two Shangra Guards moved to block her from even knocking on the door. Pluck stepped back from them and asked, "Is Votar here?" "Duke Votar is here," one guard answered. "He has left instructions that he not be disturbed." "Is he well?" she questioned. "Is there anything that I should be concerned about?" The two guards glanced at one another, and then the one guard answered, "Duke Votar is not hurt in any way." "Please let him know that I was here and that I would like to see him when he is done resting," Pluck said and then headed back the way she came. Kabal was heading to her own residence, and Pluck noticed her and called after her, "Kabal, have you seen your brother?" "Not since he left on his journey," Kabal answered. "Why do you ask?" "I went to visit him but his guards stopped me from knocking on the door for he had instructed them not to let anyone in. I was only concerned. The guard said he is fine, but I would feel a lot better if you at least saw him and told me he was fine." "You have made me very curious now," Kabal stated. "I will go and see what I can find out. Wait in your residence, and I will come and tell you what I have discovered." Pluck nodded and headed back for her own residence while Kabal walked to her brother's residence. Kabal spotted Nirva coming out of Votar's residence, but the Advisor didn't see her. Nirva walked on away from her, so Kabal just decided to go in. She thought since the guards had stopped Pluck that they would do the same for her, but they let her walk right in. Kabal went into the main bedroom, expecting to find her brother, and she did find someone within who was just sitting in a chair. "Why are all the curtains drawn?" Kabal questioned as she started for one to open it. "And why haven't you gone and seen Pluck? You have actually caused her some worry this time." "Please... do not open the curtains," a female begged her. "Who is there?" the Duchess demanded, startled by the stranger's voice. "And where is my brother?" "Kabal, is that you?" "Do I know you?" the Duchess inquired. "We were such close friends when we were younger and look at you..." the female spoke. "Look at the beautiful female Necrom you have become. I am so jealous." A name came to mind, but Kabal dared not speak it, so the Duchess demanded, "Speak your name! Speak your name now or speak to me no more!" "Do you actually recognize my voice?" she questioned the Duchess. "You have caused me to nearly weep, believing that you actually recognize my voice after so long." Kabal yelled, "I said do not speak to me unless you tell me your name!" The female stood from her chair and said, "You do recognize my voice, so I think I will cry." "Do not cry!" Kabal snapped as she held back her own tears. "Tell me your name!" "You know my name just speak it aloud." "I will not give life to my hopes by speaking her name," Kabal told her, and then she realized this game may go on forever so she said, "Tell me in your own words... Are you Bella?" "I don't know. I think I am her, but it has been so long. Maybe I am not her. Maybe I am a ghost. Maybe I am a Shadow disguised as her. Maybe—" Kabal rushed over to her and wrapped her arms around her and cried on her as she spoke, "You are alive. We thought you were dead. We thought something terrible happened to you." Bella stood there a little stunned as the Duchess lovingly hugged her in arms of joy. Votar never once touched her since he discovered it was her, so Bella thought something was wrong with her. Maybe her guise was all wrong. Maybe he didn't recognize her because they had both grown older. "I need light," Kabal said. "I have to see your face." She busied herself with lighting several candles, and then she brought them closer to Bella. "It is you. I'm so happy you are back. Where have you been? What happened to you that one sun's cycle you disappeared?" Kabal paused, thought of something, and asked, "Why don't

you want me to open a curtain?" "I am not sure what question to answer first. Sunlight bothers my eyes. I think that is because I have been in the darkness for so long. I told your brother that bandits attacked the carriage I was in and kidnapped me. I don't wish to speak any further on that matter." Kabal saw how much her friend was hurting, so she grabbed her hand and squeezed it as she said, "We don't have to talk about it now." She looked around the candlelit room as if seeing it for the first time, and Kabal questioned, "Where is my brother? Why isn't he here with you?" "I think it might have to do with the decision he had to make," Bella answered her. "Votar was forced to make a decision. He could claim a key that would free someone named Pluck from some sort of choker or he could claim me and free me." "Free you from what?" Bella paused as she thought about it, and then she said, "I don't know. My memory is a little vague on some details." "Oh... no. My brother did find the thing that would free Pluck and he..." Kabal began and then thought how it sounded, so she said, "He chose right. He chose you and now you are back with us." "I still think he feels guilty," Bella spoke. "Votar put me in this room and has come to see me only once since we arrived in this place." She paused and questioned, "Where are we?" "We are at the BloodGlacier Alcazar." "I remember this place," Bella spoke. "The three of us once came here, and we listened to the Hamarr Melody. I have never heard anything so beautiful." Kabal peered at her for a long time, and then she said, "You should not be left alone especially in the dark. I will attend to you while we are here. Are you hungry?" "I am fine right now," Bella replied. "Why don't you tell me of our homeland? What is the Great City Shangra like now?" Kabal went into great detail telling her the wondrous changes to their city. She also told her of the passing of both of their parents. "How long has Votar reigned as duke? Don't tell me. I can guess... since the death of both of your parents. You both must miss them greatly." "We do." Nirva walked into the room and said, "I wondered how long it would be before you found out." Kabal stood and yelled at the Advisor, "Why didn't either of you tell me the moment you brought Bella back?" "Things were complicated," Nirva replied. "Your brother is still dealing with the complications." He moved over to the two of them and asked, "How did you find out Bella was here?" "Actually, Pluck came to see Votar, and the guards wouldn't even let her knock, so I came to see why," Kabal answered. "Do you know who this Pluck is," Bella asked. "Yes, and we can talk about her in a little while," Kabal told her friend, and then she questioned the Advisor, "Is it true you found the key that will release Pluck?" "We were told as much," Nirva replied. "If Votar couldn't claim the key, why didn't you or one of the others, who had gone, try to claim the key?" Nirva thought about it, and then he answered, "No one considered such an action and the Duke wanted to return quickly." "He wanted to return here?" Kabal repeated. "Did he ever mention returning to Shangra?" "No, why do you ask?" Nirva inquired. Kabal glanced at her friend and said, "It is nothing. Who is caring for Bella now that she has returned to us?" "Caring for her?" Nirva repeated as if he never even considered such a thing. "I will see to it at once." Kabal spoke, "It needs to be someone skilled in healing and the restoration of the body, mind, and spirit." "I will see to it," Nirva said. "Will you stay with her until I return?" Kabal questioned him. "Bella says she isn't hungry, but I believe I will go and make her some broth and something hot to drink." Nirva replied, "I will stay with her." Kabal left and went to one of the kitchens and requested the items. She left the kitchen with the tray of food just as Pluck was coming into the kitchen. "What are you doing here?" Kabal snapped at her. "I... ah... was still hungry, so I thought I would see if there was anything left of lunch," Pluck replied a little taken back by the Duchess yelling at her. "Why are you here? Did you speak to your brother?"

Pluck glanced at the tray and said, "Broth..? Is he unwell?" "My brother is fine," Kabal answered as she continued toward his residence. Pluck chased after her as she spoke, "So you saw him?" "I..." Kabal started to answer and then realized she didn't see her brother the coward. She merely answered, "Votar is very tired from his journey." "Are you sure he is not unwell?" "I am. Now would you mind leaving me alone." Pluck upped and stopped and stood in her spot as the Duchess continued on. Kabal hated herself at that moment for she was no less of a coward than her brother. Pluck went back to the kitchen and took a tray of her own back to her residence. GuideMa was there and Quip and Staunch came by to visit with Pluck. Pluck set down the tray loaded with sandwiches and other things left over from lunch. Quip jumped on top of the table and said, "Me so hungry." "Go on and have some," Pluck told the Trife. "You too Staunch... have a few and then go to the kitchen once the two of you are done here and get a proper meal for a Dreadgon." Quip and Staunch dug in. Pluck walked away from the table and went out to the balcony as if she was a little lost. GuideMa followed her out. "Did you ever speak with Votar?" "No, but I did see Kabal again when I went to the kitchen. She was so helpful before when I asked for her assistance in seeing if anything was wrong with her brother. Kabal was not as helpful this second time. She actually snapped at me." "How is that odd behavior coming from the Duchess when it has anything to do with you?" GuideMa questioned her. "I do not know of her to talk to you without snapping." "When she yelled at me... It was like we were back in Shangra on that sun's cycle I revealed to Votar that I was a Woman. I thought I sensed hatred toward me in her voice." GuideMa asked, "When did the Duchess start not hating you?" "I guess you are right." GuideMa frowned at herself. She didn't mean to imply that the Duchess hated Pluck. GuideMa thought of something and said, "Quip and Staunch went with Duke Votar on his journey. Maybe they can tell you if something did or did not happen." "You're right again," Pluck spoke as she rushed back over to the table. "Quip, tell me about your journey with Votar." "Journey long both ways though longer second time," Quip replied. "Why is that?" "Some reason we traveled at night and never stopped until we reached the fortress. Me and Staunch were so tired." "Did you see or hear anything odd?" GuideMa questioned them as she joined them at the table. "One thing," Quip started. "One more journeyed with us on journey back." "Votar brought someone back with him," Pluck spoke. "Could you see who this person was?" "No, veil covered face," Quip answered. GuideMa suggested, "Maybe Votar brought back someone who can release you from your choker." "It is a possibility," Pluck said. "If this is true, why will Votar not see me? Why when Kabal went and saw her brother did she not tell me of this other person?" Pluck sighed, "Why am I so worried about something like this when I have to leave shortly?" GuideMa questioned her, "Do you still plan to go through with your plan?" "I do unless Votar has come up with another way to release me from my..." Pluck began as she put a hand to the Gold Choker of Fettering, "...foolish promise to the Shadow. If he has not come and seen me by tomorrow, I'll go and see him myself. I can't wait too long to enact my own plan. I have to free myself from the Shadow so that I am better able to fight them and unite us all." "You speak as if you are the Serviatrix and not the False One," GuideMa stated. "Is that what I'm doing?" Pluck asked. "Pluck Serviatrix," Quip insisted. "Staunch believe so too." Pluck sighed as she stood. "Where are you going?" GuideMa questioned her. "I thought you said you would give Votar until tomorrow." "I did and I still am," Pluck replied. "I am just hungry again. Maybe I should just go and live in the kitchen." Quip spoke, "Me and Staunch like idea. When we go?" Pluck chuckled and said, "We go now." She turned and started to leave. "You wear new cloak?" Quip

questioned. "No, this is the cloak I have been wearing." "Cloak different color," Quip stated. "Different color?" Pluck repeated as she looked down at herself. "Now that the Trife has mentioned it..." GuideMa began. "Your cloak does seem to be several shades lighter in color. It was such a dark gray before, but now it is just gray." "You are both right. I never noticed before. It must have slowly changed colors. Fairah did say it was a Sceld. I wonder if it means anything that it is changing colors. I will have to ask Fairah if I get the chance." The four of them walked on toward the kitchen and slowly Pluck's thought returned to Votar and why he wouldn't see her. What could have happened to cause him not to want to see her?

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Votar's residence...

The Duke of Shangra stood out on his balcony, looking over the land. He had been in his bedroom within his residence since seeing Bella the last time. Votar couldn't get what he had done out of his mind. He had the key to Pluck's freedom within his grasp and he chose love... a love he had all of this time for a female he had known his entire childhood. Nirva had come in mites before and his duke hadn't noticed him, so he cleared his throat and said, "Your sister knows that Bella is here." "She should know," Votar stated. "They were so close... as close as sisters." "Pluck also came to the residence and as you had instructed, the guards turned her away," Nirva relayed. "Pluck is concerned about you since you have not come and seen her since your return." "What am I going to do?" Votar questioned his advisor. "I went on a mission to save Pluck from a curse that nearly killed her. I chose a ghost from my past over her freedom." "Is that why you are so upset and have hidden yourself in here?" Nirva questioned him. "Have you chosen a ghost from your past over Pluck?" "What do you mean?" "I know you are agonizing over your decision to select Bella over the key, but is there something else you are agonizing over?" Nirva inquired of him. "You can't have two great loves in your life. Are you debating who you will select?" "I am still debating whether or not the female in the other room is Bella!" Votar shouted, and then he regained his composure and said, "I still don't know if she is really her." He asked, "What did Kabal think?" "The first thing she did was go and retrieve a tray of food from the kitchen," Nirva replied. "I have not spoken to her on the matter since. You should speak to your sister if you find you can't speak with Bella again." "I am still too afraid." "Afraid of what?" Votar admitted, "I am afraid she is Bella and what that will mean to me. I am afraid I have proclaimed my undying love to Pluck and now I am going to take it away." "Has your feelings for Pluck changed?" "They have not, but I can't have two females by my side. I will not do as my father did and have one hidden away from my mother. It tore my father and mother's relationship apart. I must decide who I want by my side." Nirva questioned him, "Should you not ask Pluck and Bella their feelings on this matter?" "If I ask them, I must tell them of the other, and I am not ready to do that just yet." He laughed to himself and then said, "It would seem I am somewhat like my father in that I am keeping secrets from those I proclaim to care about." He fell silent for about half a mite, and then Votar said, "First, I have to discover if the female is Bella... my Bella." "How would we go about discovering if she is your Bella?" Nirva questioned him. "I am not sure myself. We do need to discover what happened to her so long ago. Can you find able body people for such detective work?" "I know of a group that can help us," Nirva replied. "I will contact them and have them begin right away." Nirva started to leave, and then

he paused and said, "In the meantime, you should speak to Bella again." "I will see if I can find my courage and go and see her again."

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Sabrina's residence...

Her male Femor companion, Ferlis, returned and reported to her, "It is as you said. The Duke of Shangra has returned, but I believe he has not found the item he went in search of." "Why do you say that?" Sabrina questioned him. "The Duke of Shangra has not seen the False One since his return," Ferlis answered. "I would have thought that it would have been the first thing he would have done unless his quest ended in failure." "Go on," Sabrina urged him. "I know you did not end your snooping there. What else have you discovered?" "The convoy returned with one extra person than what they left with. The Duke of Shangra has brought back a female Necrom, and she is currently residing in the Duke's residence. Also... the guards turned the False One away when she went to visit with the Duke." "A very interesting development. How can we use this information to our advantage?" Macht, her Dreadgon companion, suggested, "There is always the old tactic of divide and conquer." "You're right. We do need to separate the False One from her allies, and who is one of her greatest allies but the Duke of Shangra. I just need to think about how to use this new development with the unknown female against the False One."

Chapter Eight

Preparing For Future Things

SoarOn found Fairah talking with one of their hosts and thanking their host for their hospitality. She especially thanked them for having a special concert for her daughter. The Immortal Egle waited until she finished, and then he walked with her as she headed back to Pluck's residence. Fairah glanced at him, and then she asked, "Ye look as if ye want to return to the road." "It is not time for me to depart yet, but have ye thought about traveling with me as I set out in search of the Immortals?" SoarOn questioned her. "I have thought about it, but I have not come to any decision," Fairah answered him. "I have yet to teach my daughter in the use of the Mystic Rose. I am to give her a verbal lesson this sun's cycle, but she needs several weeks of training and implementation of my instructions. I cannot just leave her yet but..." "Go on," he urged her. "I am still very concerned about the Trapped Immortals we keep hearing about. I just heard another report from JuJu that the Immortal who lived in this area has gone missing recently." SoarOn questioned, "Why is that unusual for this particular Immortal?" "This particular Immortal actually has a residence here in the BloodGlacier Alcazar and informs the Shamarr where they go and when they will return," Fairah explained. "The last Shamarr heard the Immortal should have returned four sun's cycles ago. Whoever is hunting the Immortals may be here targeting us." She muttered to herself, "Who could trap an Immortal but a Cursed?" He questioned her, "What concerns ye?" "It sounds like whoever is tracking us down has been doing so for many seasons and if this is true, the Cursed could not have done so. I also doubt any of the

Shadow could trap an Immortal. Could we be dealing with an unknown foe?" "It is because of our foolishness this new foe has been able to trap some of us," SoarOn stated. "Speak what ye mean," she requested. "We, who were left behind on Wellspring when Man fled, should have banded together and prepared for the Cursed return. The Shadow have, and they are far more prepared than us. They are very organized in spreading their terror. They have already wiped out three small towns." SoarOn looked very upset as he said, "I tried to convince even just a few of the others to band with me and prepare, but every single Immortal I beseeched turned me down. I became frustrated and wandered Wellspring for a time, trying to determine if the races should be saved from what the Cursed would bring to them. I saw many things among the races as I wandered among them. I saw poverty, disease, famine, pestilence, liars, and murders, and I knew... I knew Wellspring must be saved and that Wellspring was worth my time to save it." Fairah felt his hurt and despair, and she said, "I did not know this part of ye's tale. I did not realize what ye went through after I left Wellspring." She thought on his words, and then she questioned, "Would no Immortal help ye?" His despair grew as he answered, "I could not find one who saw the importance of saving Wellspring and acting now... Now..." Regret added to his sense of duty as he muttered, "It was so long ago." SoarOn bowed his head as if ashamed of something, and then he lifted his eyes and said, "If ye had been here, I believe ye would have helped me." "I would have," she told him, caught up in the whirlwind of emotions he was experiencing. "I would have traveled by ye's side and made the others see we needed to band together and not have gone our separate ways." SoarOn took her hands into his talons and said, "Ye must come with me. I shall be leaving in the next sun's cycle or two, and I shall ask ye again. Please, ye must come with me. There is so much left to do." "I shall consider ye's offer," Fairah told him. "I shall weigh the importance of ye's quests against the training I must give to my daughter. We could consider taking Pluck with us." "Malus would not permit such a thing," he told her. "Pluck is bound to the Shadow Necrom." "Perhaps Duke Votar succeeded in his quest to free Pluck from her choker." "I would not place all ye's hope in him," SoarOn said. "The Duke of Shangra is... well... easily persuaded." "What do ye mean by that?" Fairah inquired. "How should I put it? He seems like a Necrom with good intentions but where do his loyalties truly lie?" "I do not think I understand what ye are trying to say." "No matter... We should just focus on the future. Ye have a big decision to make." Fairah said, "I do. I do indeed." They walked on and a few mites later, JuJu emerged from a connecting hallway. He had overheard their conversation and snarled at the thought that SoarOn had bested him when it came to Fairah. JuJu wouldn't give up. It sounded like he had a few sun's cycles to show Fairah that he also... he also had feelings for her.

Malus flew in on his winged beast and landed a short distance away from the BloodGlacier Alcazar. He needed to speak with someone. The guards of the fortress seemed prepared for invaders by air, so Malus snuck in and searched for the False One. He didn't really have to search for her. His Constraining Dagger led him right to her. The False One was with the Watcher and two others, a Trife and a huge Dreadgon. They seemed to have finished a meal and were heading out of the kitchen. "Pluck," the Immortal Egle called out to her. She turned and said, "SoarOn, is my mother with you?" "No, why would ye ask if she is with me?" "Fairah has been spending a lot of time with you," Pluck replied, and then she told the others with her, "GuideMa, you, Quip, and

Staunch can go on back without me. I know everyone is tired since we gorged ourselves with the delicious food here. Quip and Staunch, go on back to your residence and rest. We may not get an opportunity like this again to really rest and relax." GuideMa glanced at the Immortal Egle, and then she questioned the Woman, "Are you sure you want me to go on without you? I can wait." "I am fine," Pluck replied. "Do I hear concern in your voice?" "You do," GuideMa answered. "I am concerned this is some ploy to run away from me so that I can't watch you as my duke instructed." "I will be fine," Pluck repeated. The three of them walked on, and then Pluck turned to the Immortal Egle and asked, "Was there something in particular that you wanted to speak to me about?" "There is," SoarOn answered. "I would like to speak to ye about Fairah." "Is there something a matter?" "In a way, yes," he answered. "Fairah is very attached to ye." "I care deeply about her too," Pluck said. "It is not what I mean," he said, and then SoarOn explained, "Fairah is so attached to ye that she does not want to attend to other duties that she should." "What sort of duties?" "We are very concerned about the missing Immortals. I do not know if she has explained it to ye, but we fear that there are many Trapped Immortals. We fear that a Cursed or even a Shadow has been hunting them down and trapping them to keep them out of the upcoming battle." Pluck repeated, "The upcoming battle?" "The battle or battles where the Cursed and Shadow face off against those who stand on the side of the Serviatrix and that includes the Immortals who shall stand with her." "A gathering of those who will stand with the Serviatrix," Pluck repeated as if she was focusing on something that SoarOn wasn't referring to. "Yes, I have been trying to convince Fairah to travel with me and look for these Trapped Immortals." "Will JuJu and Tad be traveling with you also?" Pluck questioned. He inquired, "Why would they?" "I thought you wanted an Immortal to travel with you while you look for the Trapped Immortals or are you wanting Fairah to go for another reason?" Pluck questioned with a smirk. "Could it be what I was talking about before?" "Ye have found me out," SoarOn replied. "I do love Fairah. I have loved her for a very long time." "Does she love you?" "Yes, but she is bound to ye as your teacher, mother, and the Immortal that is supporting ye. I need for ye to give her permission to travel with me and to leave ye behind." "Fairah must still teach me about the Mystic Rose," Pluck spoke. "I think she should teach me of the Mystic Rose before she leaves my side." SoarOn's face darkened as he said, "A bit of a selfish thing to say." "Excuse me," Pluck stated. "Here the whole of Terra is in jeopardy and ye want Fairah to stay by ye's side as if she is ye's real mother." "I didn't say that," Pluck insisted, feeling for the first time that SoarOn was upset... no, he was very angry at her for something. "I just think it is very important that she first—" "Wretched child!" he yelled. "Do ye believe because ye were once the Serviatrix that everything should revolve around ye as if ye were the sun?" Pluck stood there shocked by his outburst. He was not only angry at her, but he was enraged by something she must have done. "There can be no victory until all of the Immortals are found," SoarOn told her. She decided not to argue her point anymore and just let him talk. "Fairah has obligations to her people," he argued. "Fairah has obligations to the overall plan. Fairah has obligations to—" "You?" Pluck interrupted. "Were you hurt when Fairah left with Man when they fled Wellspring?" He took his turn to be stunned to silence, and then he answered, "Yes, she left me behind. I should have gone with her but I felt I should stay on Wellspring." "I am not taking Fairah away from you," Pluck told him with a smile. "I know she loves me, but she must also love you deeply. She has talked about you a lot when we have had opportunities to talk. Fairah has a great amount of love, so you don't have to worry about me. It is as I said it is. I need for her to teach me about the Mystic Rose. I have also been

given a great responsibility.” “As the Serviatrix?” he questioned. “I am talking about as the bearer of the Mystic Rose. She is bound to me, so I need to know how to use her power responsibly. I could take my time learning, but the Shadow and the Cursed have shown me I can’t wait.” “What if Malus comes and takes ye away before ye can have ye’s lessons?” “I guess that will mean that Fairah can go ahead and leave with you. You’re right in that I don’t know how much time I have, but I should learn all that I can while I do have the time.” “Ye have wisdom.” “I’ve had a very good teacher.” SoarOn spoke, “I am sorry that I yelled at ye. It is just... I see my mission as very important, and I can- not delay it any longer.” “It is Fairah’s decision,” Pluck said. “She may still decide to go with you before she trains me.” He questioned her, “How shall ye feel if she does decide on that path?” “I don’t know. Maybe disappointed... but so much is going on,” Pluck replied. “Maybe gathering all of the Immortals is more important than teaching me in the use of the Mystic Rose. I take that back. I will be disappointed, but I will also learn to live with it. I have much to think about now. Did you have anything else you wanted to ask me?” “No, I have taken up enough of ye’s time,” SoarOn answered her. Pluck turned and started toward her residence, but then she changed her mind and walked in a different direction so that she could just walk alone. Malus kept to the shadows and listened in on their conversation, and then he followed his target. Malus followed from a distance and then lost his prey down one of the corridors. “What do ye think ye are doing?” SoarOn spoke as he came up behind the Shadow Necrom. “Did ye think that I had not noticed ye when I was speaking with the False One?” Malus glanced around the area to see if anyone else was there, and then he removed his dagger and started for the Immortal Egle with murderous intent. SoarOn lifted a clawed-hand and shot a ball of light at the Shadow Necrom, and Malus caught it with his dagger. SoarOn kept his clawed-hand up and increased the power of his ball of light, and Malus continued to resist his power. SoarOn grinned and then he let the Shadow Necrom have the full brunt of power of the ball of light, and the power sent Malus hurling backward. He was slow to get up and by then, the Immortal Egle was right in front of him. “Did ye really think that ye could take on my powers?” “I did,” Malus replied. “I have been trained well, but it would seem not well enough.” “Yes, ye’s lessons must continue,” SoarOn spoke as he shifted his stance from an aggressive one to one of familiarity with the Shadow Necrom. “Ye are still far from taking on an Immortal on ye’s own. Ye must continue to practice what I have taught ye.” “I will,” Malus replied. “What have ye learned of the False One?” “Her sword is called the Lux. I am not familiar with that weapon, but it does appear to be very powerful,” SoarOn answered. “What does concern me is that the False One has in her possession the Mystic Rose. That item of Maag-llee I am very familiar with, and it is very powerful, but we do have one thing going for us. Fairah has yet to teach the False One of its use. Take Pluck back with ye this sun’s cycle, and she shall never have an opportunity to learn.” “Why do you really want me to take Pluck this sun’s cycle?” Malus questioned. “Is it because of this Fairah you are infatuated with?” “Never mind Fairah. Ye have ye’s paws full with the False One. Ye nearly killed her when ye took her life. It would have been a grave mistake to have taken her life so early in the war. Ye need to use the False One.” “I plan on using her as I am using you,” Malus told him. “Do you have the same plans for this Immortal of Man as I have plans for the False One?” “I said never mind Fairah,” SoarOn spoke with more of a threat seeding his words. “But that does remind me of something I want to ask ye. I have seen that ye have given the False One ye’s Sceld. Did not ye’s mother give ye that article of clothing?” “She did, but it seemed much happier when Pluck was wearing it,” Malus replied. “In honor of my mother, I gave the Sceld a better home.

Have you noticed it has already started to lighten in color?" "I have, but what shall happen to the Sceld should ye have to destroy the False One?" SoarOn asked the Shadow Necrom. Malus stated, "I could ask the same of you in reference to the Immortal Woman." "I shall not be killing Fairah," SoarOn told him. "I shall only be trapping her as I have trapped the other Immortals unless I can sway her to my way of thinking." "I still do not trust you, Immortal Egle. You might have found me when I was still a young Shadow and began to teach me how to fight the Immortals and the Serviatrix, but I am still nowhere near the power that I need to defeat her. Pluck still defies me even when her life is gone from her body." "Now ye understand why I must take Fairah with me one way or another. I shall also get rid of the Immortal Necrom and the Immortal Toadian while I am here. I have trapped more than a fifth of the Immortals. Their ranks are diminished. The Shadow and the Cursed should have no problems winning this war." "And what will you be getting out of all of this?" Malus questioned him. "You are supposed to be on the side of light and goodness. Are you sure you are not a Cursed in the guise of an Immortal." "Never mind my goals," SoarOn snapped at his unruly pupil. "Go and take the False One with ye. I have a couple of traps to lay." "Wait!" Malus called out to him. "You told me you would tell me more about my mother. I know she was once an Immortal Necrom and that she gave up her immortality so that she could have a child." "What more do ye need to know of her?" SoarOn questioned him. "She loved ye but the Shadow found out about ye and took ye at a very young age as their own when she died." "Were you friends with my mother?" Malus inquired. "Yes, I knew her when she was still an Immortal. Now I have no more time for ye's questions. We both have things we must do."

Sometime later...

Pluck made her way back to her residence, and GuideMa was the only one there. The Femor was reading the book she had borrowed from the TowerRoth Citadel. "Are you still reading that book? I thought you would have finished it by now." "Absolutely not!" GuideMa snapped at her. "What are you talking about?" GuideMa looked up from the page and said, "I will not be reading anymore to you. What are you, some child?" Pluck laughed and said, "No, I was only asking why it seems to be taking you so long to finish the book." "Oh..." GuideMa spoke in a gentler tone. "It is simple. I am reading it again." Pluck went in and took a hot bath. She put on clean clothes and had her clothes sent out to be washed. Pluck came out of the bathroom and didn't see the Femor anywhere. "GuideMa," Pluck called out. "What is it?" "I finally know what I need to do. I need to gather an army. I don't need to go around and search for prophecies. I have the action I need to focus on but first, I have to free myself from Malus." "Why are you telling me this?" "Because you are my... watcher, and I need your advice." "Advice from the Watcher... What advice could I give you except for how to best to—" "Spy on people," Pluck interrupted. "No!" GuideMa snapped at her again. "I'm not peeping anything, so stop saying that I am." Pluck chuckled, and it felt good to laugh. She had so much on her mind from why Votar didn't want to see her, to why Kabal was all hushed about it too, along with not knowing if she would have enough time to learn about the Mystic Rose, and would she ever be free from the Shadow. "I am tired," Pluck spoke as she lay on her own bed. "I think I am going to take a nap." "Before you do," GuideMa began. "I want to tell you something that I have kept to myself for a time now. I want to tell you what I saw when you were standing on the Throne of Kroth." "Oh... The longer you take to tell me the more terrible possibilities I envision. Maybe you just need to tell me. My imagination has gotten away from

me." GuideMa nodded, and then she began, "That sun's cycle when I turned around while riding on the Giant Lunar Flytrap, I saw you standing on the statue of the Disappearing Roth King and—" "It is time to go," Malus interrupted as he stepped into the bedroom. Both of the females screamed at him, not expecting anyone to jump out at them, not that he jumped. "Silence! Before the guards are summoned," Malus roared at them. Both Pluck and GuideMa covered their mouths as if to stifle a laugh. "Come, False One, it is time to go," he instructed her. Pluck rose and knelt on her knees upon the bed and looked down at her robe. "I don't have my clothes. I would prefer to leave after my clothes are returned to me." "Your clothes?" Malus repeated as something came to mind, and he questioned her as if accusing her of some crime, "Where is the Sceld?" "You do know what the cloak is," Pluck stated as she wondered if he knew it was a Sceld. "It is still with me," she answered as she motioned to the bed beneath her. "I have been lying on it." "All you need is the Sceld," Malus told her. "Come, I will provide you with new clothes when we return to the camp." "Shadow clothing..." Pluck spoke as if she was cursing. "I don't think I would like to wear Shadow clothing. It will make me feel more out of sorts than I already am around you Shadow." Malus turned to the Watcher and inquired, "Is this clothing that important?" "Why are you asking me?" GuideMa questioned him. "Most of the time, Femor's don't wear clothing." He turned back to the False One and inquired of her, "Why is this clothing that important to you?" Pluck tried to think of something that would satisfy him, so she answered, "It has my High Guard pin on it. Oh... I guess had. Tabitha has my High Guard pin now, but the clothes themselves were given to me by my friend. The KellyZings went through a great deal of care to make my shirts... or shirts... I do seem to go through them... tearing... ripping... Maybe I do need new clothes... sturdy clothes." "Which is it?" Malus asked, agitated. "Do you want your old clothes or do you need new ones?" "I need... What I don't need is Shadow clothes," Pluck replied. "They will be ready in the morning and if we leave tomorrow, I will be able to have a good night's rest in this very comfortable bed." Malus peered at the bed she was lying on, and he stated, "My bed is comfortable... very comfortable, and I offered it to you... to both of you the first night you spent with me." Pluck said nothing. "Females are hard to understand," he spoke. Something still bothered him about their last encounter, so Malus asked, "Why did you try to kill me and yet now you seem almost at peace with me?" "You were trying to kill everyone I love," Pluck answered. "Love is a weakness... Those who are of importance to you are only a weakness." "How would you know?" Pluck questioned him. "Have you ever had someone of importance to you?" "I did before I became Shadow. My mother... She loved me and I, her. Her love didn't save her." "Did her love save you?" Pluck questioned him. "What do you mean?" "You make it sound like her love for you is why she is dead? My question is are you alive because of her love for you?" "In a way, I am," he replied. "But I am Shadow now. Love can only be a weakness." Pluck stared at him for a long time, and then she asked, "When was the last time you had food that was not... that was not Shadow food?" "I don't know." "Come then. I find that I am hungry again, and I believe it is your fault I am so ravenous. My life was taken from me and it is taking my body a lot of energy to replenish it." Pluck stood from the bed and held out her hand for him. Malus realized this was the first time she offered to hold his hand. She said, "Come and dine with me." "I can't eat with you. I am not supposed to be here." "Why can't you?" Pluck asked. "Everyone knows that you will return for me, and they know not to stop you, so why can't you eat with me as my guest?" He thought about it and accused her, "This is some sort of trick." "It is," Pluck said. "Once you arrive in the kitchen, I will attack you with different types of

food until you are so stuffed that you can't move and then when you can't move, I'll make my escape from you." He looked at her for a long time, and then he said, "You jest. This is something called a joke." She nodded. "Fine, I will come and eat with you but know I will take your life from you again if this is some sort of trick." Pluck grabbed the Sceld and put it on over her robe, and then she grabbed the Lux who was leaning against her bed. GuideMa also stood as she set her book on her own bed. "Come on, let's go. I'm famished," Pluck said, and then she raced ahead and out of their residence as she headed for the kitchen. The Femor walked with the Shadow Necrom. Malus spoke, "I find at times that she is unpredictable. I would have thought she would have attacked me the moment I appeared, but she never even took hold of her sword. I also find at times that she is amazing." GuideMa stated, "What I find amazing is that you didn't use your dagger on her and make her come with you as she is. I also find you unpredictable. You actually accepted her invitation." "I am intrigued. I have not had non-Shadow food in so long. I have forgotten what it tastes like." They followed after Pluck who was already waiting on them in the hallway. The three of them headed for the kitchen and most of the people living there paid no heed that a Shadow Necrom was among them. Most of the people didn't notice. GuideMa quickened her steps, caught up to the Woman, and questioned her in whispers, "What are you doing?" "I'm hungry. I'm going to eat." "It is not what I meant and you know it." "I just thought since Malus wasn't always a Shadow that I could show him some of the things he might be missing out on, and I truly am hungry." Pluck questioned her, "Do you think it is a mistake to have a meal with him?" "If someone sees him who knows who he is, yes, I believe you will find that this was a mistake." They entered the kitchen, and Pluck requested that they have a private area to eat and the kitchen staff showed them to a room with only a few small tables. The kitchen staff brought them in a feast and set the feast up on the other three tables. Pluck went and loaded up her plate and instructed the Shadow Necrom, "Come and eat." He stood there shocked as the False One piled food on her plate and returned to the table and started to eat it like some hungry desert wolf. She looked up while he watched her, and Pluck said, "Grab you a plate and fill it up before I eat everything." Malus glanced at the Femor, and GuideMa said, "She will eat everything. I've seen her eat this way twice already today." "How can I feed such an appetite once we return to the Shadow Camp?" he inquired. "I can hear you," Pluck spoke. "But I do hope to eat enough this sun's cycle and that my stomach will return to normal by tomorrow." GuideMa grabbed herself a plate, but she only placed a dessert she didn't recognize that had a wild strawberry filling. She joined the Woman at the table and slowly enjoyed her pastry. Malus was finally able to pry his eyes off of the False One, and he grabbed a plate and placed a small amount of each of the food so that he could try each of them. He returned to the table and began to eat. Malus finished sampling all of the food and decided on a few he would have more of and looked up. Pluck was watching him. The False One seemed to have been watching him for a while. "What is it?" he asked. She questioned, "What were the things you really liked? I think there were at least three things so what were they?" He looked down at his plate and said, "There was this orange meat in chunks with some sort of coating on it mixed in with rice and vegetables. It had a sweet-tangy taste." "I have asked the chefs all the names of their dishes and what is in them since I have been here quite a few times. The dish you are referring to is Sweet and Sour Swamp Chicken. What else did you like?" He motioned to his plate and talked about a few more of the items, and she explained what was in each and what the dish was called. They all finished, and then Pluck returned to her residence along with Malus and GuideMa. A pile of her clean clothes laid on her

bed, and Pluck went over to them and stared at them. "Your clothes are back. You could leave tonight," Malus said. Pluck told him, "I could, but then I wouldn't get my good night's rest in my very very comfortable bed." He thought about it, and then he said, "I will come for you in the morning." "If you want, we could eat one more meal before we leave," Pluck said. "Their breakfast meals here are just as good as their lunch meals." "You mean your third lunch," GuideMa muttered. "I have already eaten more than I usually eat in a few sun's cycles," Malus told her. "I don't think I will eat again tomorrow. You should wake early and go and eat again. I will not be able to provide you with such large amounts of food. I will come when the sun is halfway to its high sun mark." Pluck told him, "I will be ready." Malus left the way he came, and Pluck went out into the main room where GuideMa was, and soon silence filled the residence. "I still don't understand what you are doing," GuideMa spoke. "But I guess my part isn't to understand but to watch." A knock came to their door, and GuideMa went and answered it. One of Sabrina's companions was there, and they spoke, "Sabrina would like to speak with the False One." GuideMa turned to the Woman, and Pluck said, "Let me get changed and we will come."

Outside the BloodGlacier Alcazar...

Malus kept to the shadows as he made his way to his winged beast. He was curious about something he had overheard the guards talk about. The Duke of Shangra had secretly brought back someone on his journey, and the rumor was that someone was a female Necrom which he also placed in his private residence. Malus wanted to see for himself who this female Necrom was so he stopped, turned, and headed to find the Duke of Shangra's residence.

Sometime later...

Pluck and GuideMa arrived at Sabrina's residence and were shown in. Sabrina was sitting on a chair that had been put on a newly created platform. Pluck recognized the chair to be the throne from the Tower- Roth Citadel. "You brought your Femor with you," Sabrina said. "I don't think you could call her my Femor, but yes, she has come with me," Pluck stated. "You said nothing about coming alone." Sabrina glanced at her companion, and the companion shrugged. Sabrina said, "I guess I never made that clear. No matter... You are here and we can talk." Pluck asked, "What did you want to talk about?" "Do you know what went on during our meeting that you were unable to attend?" Sabrina questioned the False One. "I guess I don't." "Do you mean to tell me that none, who support you, told you of the new prophecy?" Sabrina asked of her as if she implied something of dire concern. "No, I haven't heard there was a newly discovered prophecy," Pluck answered, and then she asked, "Did SoarOn, JuJu, and Tad discover a new one?" "They have and it is a very interesting one. You should have one of your friends tell you of it," Sabrina suggested to her. "It started quite an argument." Pluck thought of something, and then she asked, "Had Votar... Had Duke Votar returned and attended the meeting?" "No, the Duke of Shangra had not returned, and the meeting went on without him and his advisor." "What about Duchess Kabal... was she at this meeting?" "Come to think of it, she was also absent from this meeting," Sabrina answered. Her male Femor companion leaned to her and whispered something, and then Sabrina corrected herself and said, "I was wrong. Duchess Kabal was at this meeting." GuideMa spoke up and asked, "Could you excuse us for a moment?" She pulled the Woman aside and inquired of her, "Why are you asking about Votar and Kabal?" "Two reasons..."

Pluck began. "There was some sort of argument, I assume, about the new prophecy. Was Votar there and he knows? I was also wondering if this could be why Votar will not see me and why Kabal acted oddly around me, but I guess Kabal only acted oddly around me after she went into Votar's Residence. Sabrina has told me that, most likely, whatever went on at the meeting has nothing to do with why Votar hasn't seen me yet." "Seems logical," GuideMa stated. They both returned to where they were talking with the third Serviatrix. "Did you call me here to tell me what happened in the meeting or only to entice me to find out what happened in the meeting from my friends?" Sabrina told the False One, "You do catch on quick." "Was there anything else you wanted to tell me?" Pluck questioned her. "Nope, that was it." Pluck peered at her for a few moments, then turned, and started for the exit. "Wait... there was one other thing," Sabrina called after her. She waited until the False One turned and faced her, and then Sabrina said, "I have heard that you have not seen the Duke of Shangra since his return. I have also heard that you were stopped from entering his residence to see him yourself. Do you know why?" GuideMa whispered to the Woman, "She is playing some sort of game with you." "I know," Pluck whispered back, and then she spoke aloud, "I don't know why. Do you?" Sabrina peered down at her, debating if now was the time to tell the False One. As the third Serviatrix stared at them in silence, Pluck thought she realized why a platform had been created and why Sabrina had the throne. The platform seemed to be designed to lift the chair high above anyone who would be standing so that the one seated would be elevated. It would appear that Sabrina was wanting something far more than just the title of Serviatrix. Sabrina decided to wait for the False One to ask her what she knew, but Pluck only stared back at her. Sabrina continued to wait with a smirk on her face, and then the False One did something unexpected. Pluck turned without another word and headed for the exit. The female Femor with her also seemed surprised by her actions, but then the female Femor walked after the False One. "Wait... I will tell you what I have learned," Sabrina called out but the False One kept walking. Sabrina rose from her throne and called out again, "Wait..." The False One was still walking so Sabrina went after her, grabbed her by the arm, and forced her to turn and face her. "I said wait." "Is there something you want to tell me?" Pluck asked as if the third Serviatrix hadn't been calling after her. "Yes, the Duke of Shangra didn't return alone." "He did have others with him," Pluck spoke. Sabrina said, "I mean he brought someone back that had not gone with him on his journey." "He brought someone back with him." "Yes, and he has kept this person in his residence. The Duke of Shangra has not left and nor has this person left the residence. They have stayed together in his residence all alone." Sabrina added to only cause trouble, "Who knows what they are doing all alone?" "What sort of meetings could be going on this long?" Pluck wondered aloud. "Meetings..?" Sabrina repeated. "I didn't mean meetings. I meant... oh, never mind." Sabrina glanced back at her throne, and then she asked, "Why did you make me come after you?" "I wanted us to be standing on equal ground," Pluck replied as she motioned at the floor between them. "If we are to beat the Shadow and the Cursed, we need to band together, not tear each other down." "Tear each other down? Is that what you think I am doing, highborn?" "I don't know your mind or your heart," Pluck told her, then motioned behind her to the throne, and said, "I can only guess by what I see and hear. I do thank you for telling me about Votar's guest. It might explain quite a bit if he has been having meetings with this person." "Meetings..? I don't think you understand what I..." Sabrina spoke, shook her head, and said, "Never mind. You will eventually understand what I am talking about. Go, highborn. I would go and visit with the Duke of Shangra before it becomes too late to see

him." Pluck thought about how she had to leave in the morning, and she said, "You're right. I should go and see him. I just don't know if now is the right time." She turned and walked out followed by GuideMa. The female Femor caught up to her as Pluck headed back toward their residence. GuideMa asked, "What was all that back there? Why were you leaving before finding out why Sabrina had summoned you?" Pluck smiled and said with a little giggle, "I didn't know if I could pull off walking so slowly. Did you notice that I was walking so slowly when I turned and walked away from her throne?" "No, I believe my shock over you leaving dulled my eyes and possibly dulled the eyes of Sabrina." "It was my intention to find out the why but I didn't like how she was trying to tell me," Pluck spoke and asked, "Did you notice the throne?" "I did." "I wonder how they got that thing here. Do you think they stole it?" "Without a doubt, but I don't think the Roth Monks will miss it," GuideMa said. "They didn't seem like the kind to care too much about possessions."

Back in Sabrina's residence...

The third Serviatrix paced back and forth as she ranted, "Did you hear what the False One said? She wanted us to stand on equal ground but that can never happen between highborns and the rest of us." Ferlis, her Femor companion, questioned her, "Did you hear what else the False One said? She said if we are to beat the Shadow and the Cursed, we need to band together, not tear each other down." "Of course, I heard. She was standing right in front of me when she spat that nonsense!" "Is it nonsense?" the male Femor questioned her. "Are our goals only to bring about a realm where everyone is free or should our goals include defeating the Shadow and the Cursed so that we can achieve our goals?" "What are you saying?" "Maybe we should band with these highborns while our goals are aligned. We can defeat one foe and—" "Turn around and slit the throats of our allies when we no longer need them. I do like that idea," Sabrina said, went, and sat on her throne. She thought about Ferlis' plan but some of the False One's words crept back into her mind, and Sabrina muttered, "What does the False One mean by she doesn't know my mind or my heart? She doesn't need to know them. Why would she want to know them? She is a highborn... a highborn that carries the same shame as my father." Ferlis had followed her into the room with the throne, and the male Femor patiently waited until she saw him. "Was there something else?" "Yes, there was," Ferlis replied. "I want to talk about our plan. The one where you would tell the False One about the female Necrom the Duke of Shangra brought back with him." "I did just that." "Well..." Ferlis started as he made a face and said, "You actually only said, someone and person. Maybe if you had stuck with our plan and told the False One the new arrival was a female Necrom, she might have gathered what you were trying to imply." "I never told the False One the new arrival was a female?" "No," Ferlis replied. "I guess that would have helped." "Greatly... for it would seem this False One understands some deep meanings to things but may not understand simple things." "I can't believe I never told her that the Duke of Shangra's guest was a female."

* * *

Votar's residence...

The Duke of Shangra was still out on his balcony looking out at the surrounding area of blood-ice and snow. His sister entered, and she didn't look all that happy. "I wondered when you would

come and see me," Votar said. "Go on. Yell at me." "Yell at you about what?" Kabal questioned him. "Should I yell at you because you never told me that you found Bella? Our Bella... She's alive." "I know," he replied. "How is this possible? You went out to find something that would release Pluck from her choker and you came back with Bella. I'm so happy, but I also wonder if this is some sort of ploy by the Shadow and/or Cursed. How could Bella have been at this place you just happened to go to?" "Have you spoken with her?" "I have," Kabal replied. "She seems very confused." "But do you think she is Bella?" her brother questioned her. "I do," his sister answered. "She is different but only to be expected since it has been a very long time since we have seen each other, and who knows what they put her through... whoever took her." "Bella said that our father had her kidnapped but that bandits overtook her carriage and whisked her away," Votar stated. "I want to believe this is Bella as you do, but I also have my doubts because of the coincidence of finding her and having to choose her over Pluck's freedom." "Bella told me as much," Kabal spoke. "You should tell Bella who Pluck is and you also need to speak with Pluck. How dare you keep something like this from her?" "From her?" he questioned. "When did you become Pluck's champion?" "Since..." Kabal began, and then she said, "I am not sure of the exact moment but... It seems like I have been following her forever. I don't think I can stop now. I want to see how her story ends." "Her story?" Votar repeated. "What of Gamemnon and his feelings toward Pluck? What about Bella?" She answered, "Gamemnon and I are through. He has chosen Tabitha over me." "Has he?" Votar questioned, knowing his friend. "I don't see that." "See what you must. I see that he has grabbed hold of an opportunity for power and he will never let go," Kabal spoke still very angry over the whole thing. "What about Bella?" Votar repeated. "Thankfully, she is not a Serviatrix candidate or it would be a whole lot harder to choose." Votar said, "I don't think you understand." "I understand," she told her brother. "You are wondering what I will tell Pluck. I will tell her nothing because you are going to tell her everything about Bella and how you went to find her freedom but came back with someone very precious to us. I will not tell her that you chose Bella over her freedom because that is something you must tell her." "I see." "Do you?" his sister asked. "Before you go and meet with Pluck, you must decide right now whose heart... no, you must decide right now who you will give your heart to. Pluck has already said that her heart belongs to you. You must—" "I have already decided," he said. "I decided the moment I brought Bella back." "Why have you kept yourself in this room then and not seen Pluck?" "I wanted to make sure I had made the right decision. I wanted to make sure of my heart before I gave it away." "Oh..." Kabal spoke. He said, "You sound disappointed." "I am, but it is your heart and not mine. I don't have to decide between Bella and Pluck. They are both my friends..." Kabal lifted a finger, pointed it at her brother, and threatened him, "Don't you ever tell Pluck that I consider her my friend." "You should tell her," Votar spoke, and then he questioned, "Or are you as much of a coward as I am when it comes to speaking of things of the heart?" "It does run in the family." Votar walked over to his sister, kissed her on the forehead, and said, "Thank you. I go now to speak with Pluck. She must know where my heart lies." Kabal watched as her brother left, and then she muttered, "I hate that you are going to hurt Alba. She has already been hurt so much."

Chapter Nine

Plans Put Into Motion

JuJu approached SoarOn and asked him, "Do ye mind if we talk alone?" The Immortal Egle glanced around the crowded area and said, "I hear that there is an underground tunnel within the glacier nearby. I was heading there to look at it. We can talk there." JuJu followed SoarOn out of the BloodGlacier Alcazar's vast structure and along a path that wound through a canyon of deep-red ice. It wasn't cold on the path for the path was made of the crystal-clear silver Crystox which didn't generate heat only repelled the cold and kept all those who walked upon the path cool and not freezing. It was another reason the Hamarr used Crystox to build the Alcazar. Crystox would keep in the warmth which it did absorb and spread through the structure of the Alcazar and at the same time, it repelled the cold. A very good combination for a structure surrounded by ice with a hot spring at its center. Nearly to their destination, SoarOn inquired, "What did ye want to talk about?" "Two things," JuJu replied. "And the first thing is Fairah." "Do ye see her as a thing?" "No, why would ye... Ah... ye are using my form of speaking against me. Of course, I do not see Fairah as a thing to own or possess," JuJu answered, and then he questioned, "Do ye?" "I see her as the love of my life," SoarOn professed. "Can ye say the same?" "To her? No, over our very long lives I have not been able to tell her my true feelings toward her," JuJu admitted. "I wish to tell her, and I intend to tell her soon, and I shall do so before ye whisk her away in search of the Trapped Immortals." "Ye overheard our conversation," SoarOn stated surprised. "Did ye hear anything else?" "During ye's conversation with Fairah, no," JuJu replied as if implying something. "What else was there? Has she confessed her undying love for ye?" "If I said, yes, would ye still confess ye's love for her?" "I would. I have been silent for too long. I shall tell her so that she knows," JuJu stated as he crossed his arms and nodded his own approval at his formulated idea. SoarOn waited on him to continue. The Immortal Necrom only nodded like some Great Golden Dodo Bird or maybe a panda-marked dodo bird would be a better term. SoarOn waited a few moments more, and then he stated, "Ye said there were two things." They entered the underground tunnel and started to walk through it. It was colder inside with the walls of ice closer to them, but the Crystox path still kept them cool. "Yes..." JuJu stated as he stopped nodding. He cleared his throat and then said, "The second thing I would like to talk about is the prophecy that ye spoke of to the others." The Immortal Necrom questioned, "Why did ye mislead the group during the meeting?" "Mislead them how?" SoarOn questioned him. "I heard that ye used the word 'beware' when ye should have used the words 'take heed' when describing the False One when she declares many things and shall sway others to her way of belief." SoarOn asked, "Does it really matter that I did not remember the exact words?" "I doubt ye did not remember the exact words," JuJu spoke as his suspicions over the Immortal Egle's true motives on the misuse of the word betray took on a more malicious agenda. "And yes, of course, it matters... It changes the meaning of the line." They continued walking through the tunnel and hadn't past anyone since they left the BloodGlacier Alcazar. "Ahh..." SoarOn spoke as he shook a single claw at the Immortal Necrom, and then he said, "I wondered if I had gone unnoticed by ye's gift to sniff out evil." JuJu replied, "I thought at first the whiff of malice I detected was only caused by my dislike of ye." "Dislike..? Why do ye dislike me? Was it because I saw Fairah as

someone I wanted to spend the rest of my seasons with and I told her?" "Yes," JuJu admitted. "I wanted to be the one to tell her how I felt but as usual, I delayed and ye pounced." "Pouncing is what Necroms do," SoarOn corrected him. "I swept in as ye laid in wait." JuJu sighed and said, "We can talk of Fairah later since we have already discussed her. I would like to continue discussing why ye led the group astray when it concerns the False One." "I would like to know the same thing," Tad spoke up as the Immortal Toadian joined them. He shivered a bit as if the cool air affected him more than those insulated by fur and feather. "I see that I might not have fooled ye either," SoarOn spoke. "Fooled me concerning what?" Tad inquired as he wrapped his arms around his toad-like form. "I just joined this conversation." SoarOn informed him, "We are talking of Fairah. We are also talking of JuJu's lack of pouncing." "Actually..." JuJu interrupted him. "We are talking about why ye led the group astray with ye's usage of words." "Sabrina had relayed the prophecy to me," Tad spoke. "I had noticed the word 'beware' when other words were actually used. I thought she only remembered incorrectly or purposely changed them. Either is possible with her and her unseen agenda." "Unseen agenda," SoarOn stated. "I shall keep that in mind while dealing with the third Serviatrix." JuJu asked again, "Why did ye mislead the group?" "I did so to obtain my goal just as I had us come down here to this tunnel away from everyone else to obtain my goal, though, I had not planned on Tad joining us," SoarOn spoke as he waved his hand, and the ice sprung up and ensnared both of the other Immortals. "But I did bring ye down here to bring an end to something as I brought ye here to bring an end to ye's meddling. I shall just be able to ensnare two Immortals." JuJu and Tad were both caught by surprise and had no time to counter with defensive Maag-Ilee or even use any protective Maag-Ilee to safeguard themselves. The deep-red ice completely encompassed them, and they were unable to free themselves. SoarOn added another layer of ice and then another layer of ice over them, and then a voice distracted him from his work. "What are ye doing?" SoarOn turned to see that Fairah was standing there, and he questioned her, "I had hoped to leave the Alcazar and bring ye with me before I had to explain everything." "Explain what?" Fairah inquired as she moved toward the freshly made ice wall. She couldn't see through it, so she lifted her hand and sensed those within, and then she uttered, "Ye are... ye are trapping JuJu and Tad in some sort of Maag-Ilee Ice. No, this is not Maag-Ilee but a mixture of—" "It is not a mixture of anything," SoarOn insisted. "It is only Maag-Ilee." He then questioned her, "How much did ye hear?" She ignored his question and started to ask one of her own, "What is the reason... Oh, no... Ye are the one! Ye are the one!" Fairah couldn't say anymore and covered her mouth in shock. She regained her composure and asked, "Are ye the one who has been going around trapping the Immortals?" "I have been the one," he replied. "Why would ye do such a thing?" Fairah inquired. "It had to be done," he replied. "The Immortals would have finally banded together and tried to stop me." "Stop ye from doing what?" "Saving Wellspring," SoarOn answered. "Certain things must be done to save this land." She questioned, "How does trapping the Immortals help ye to save Wellspring? What would they have stopped ye from doing?" "Sacrifices must be made to save Wellspring. They would not have seen my wisdom, and they would have eventually prevented me from enacting these sacrifices," SoarOn replied. "What sacrifices?" "The races," he replied. "They must all die." "I thought ye told me Wellspring was worth saving." "I did," SoarOn stated. "The land is worth saving but not the races. They are an infection on the land, and they must be eradicated. The Shadow and Cursed shall purge this land of the infection, and then I shall purge the land of the Shadow and the Cursed." Fairah questioned, "Ye alone?" "No, at that

time, I shall release the Immortals, and we shall purge the land of the Shadow and the Cursed." She felt sick with an illness that afflicted her very soul, and Fairah stated, "No, this cannot be ye talking. What happened to the SoarOn I knew?" "I am still here," he replied. "I am still here." Her shock intensified and she fell to silence. SoarOn asked her, "Did ye overhear my conversation with JuJu?" "Words do carry through these ice tunnels, so... yes, I heard what ye told JuJu and Tad. Ye spoke a lie to the group and that lie shall affect my daughter's future." "Pluck is not really ye's daughter. She adopted ye and in return, ye believe that ye love her, but it cannot be," SoarOn said as if he had to explain it to her. "Pluck is mortal and ye are immortal. Ye need to be with someone who is also immortal." "Ye mean I need to be only with ye," Fairah spoke more as an accusation. "Yes, I only want ye to be with me." "Ye sound like the Shadow Necrom as he tries to possess more than Pluck's life. Ye cannot just take my heart." "I thought I already had ye's heart. Maybe I was wrong. I do not want to take ye's heart," SoarOn said. "I want ye to give it to me freely." "Why would I do such a thing now?" "Because ye love me and ye also want to save Wellspring as I want to save Wellspring. Choose, my dear Fairah... Come with me and save Wellspring or fight me here to save those who are within the ice behind me." "I cannot just leave Pluck behind or forsake the love I have for her because ye believe it does not exist." He said, "I once told ye that we all have a role to play in existence, and I believe Pluck has found hers as the False One. I also said that support and follow are not the same thing. I shall ask my question from before but before I do that... I shall remind ye of the most current prophecy." Fairah's mind whirled as she tried to comprehend all that was going on and to formulate a plan of her own. "Listen to me carefully," he began, and then SoarOn quoted, " 'The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all.' That includes ye, my dear Fairah. 'The Serviatrix can only depend on the Serviatrix. Victory comes from this understanding. Death follows those who believe in themselves.' Pluck is destined to either go on her own as the true Serviatrix or she shall fail or succeed as the False One." He skipped the next line and proceeded to the next by saying, " 'Take heed for the False One shall declare many things and shall sway others to her way of belief. The Shadow shall strengthen themselves and fracture at the same time. The Shadow shall rally behind the False One for the False One shall reveal what had been concealed and forgotten.' I believe..." he stated, "...that the one known as Pluck is the False One and she has a role she must play to ensure the Shadow are victorious in the coming war. I believe Malus shall eventually sway Pluck to his side, and then the Shadow and the Cursed shall destroy all the races." "My daughter is not the False One!" "She is not ye's daughter!" SoarOn screamed at her, and then he regained his composure and said, "Pluck is only the False One." He paused, and then he quoted, " 'The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. One shall betray the very heart of the Serviatrix as past ghosts haunt the present. The Serviatrix shall be forsaken by all. The heart of a true mother shall destroy the heart of the one she gave birth to. Hearts are fragile but also can be mended. Break a heart and fly away... and true salvation shall come to the one who would have fought to hold on.' Ye see, my dear Fairah, the only thing ye were destined to do to Pluck is to forsake her. Pluck, if she is the true Serviatrix, is destined to be alone forever. If Pluck is the False One, she is destined to be alone also for she shall destroy everything she holds dear." "No... It cannot be," Fairah declared. "It is and now I shall ask my question." SoarOn paused as he readied himself to attack Fair if she should resist him, and then he asked, "Shall ye still follow her as the False One? Or shall ye help me save Wellspring?"

* * *

Gamemnon's residence...

A knock came to his door, and one of the Guards of Torlawn let in Tabitha and Groth. "You have actually come to see me," Gamemnon spoke, and then he asked, "What do I owe this rare visit of yours to?" "I would like to discuss something of great importance?" Tabitha answered. "Would this have anything to do with your servir?" "Alba..? No, I wish to speak about another matter," she replied. "A matter that I have been wanting to speak to you about since you introduced me to my birth father, King Solom." "Now you have my interest. What might this matter be?" "You and I?" Tabitha replied. "I want to know what sort of relationship we have." He questioned her as if she should, "You do not know?" "I thought I did," she answered as she moved closer to him. Groth remained by the door. "I thought your interests in me were as a female and the daughter of your king, but now I doubt one of those interests are still true... or they might not have been true from the start." "Which interest might that be? You as a female or you as a daughter of a king and the Serviatrix." "The Serviatrix would make your interests move to three but an addition does not change the matter I wish to speak about," Tabitha spoke, and then she asked, "How do you see me as a female?" "How do I see you?" Gamemnon spoke as he pondered the question. "You are very attractive but young." "You haven't answered my question so let me ask it plainly," Tabitha said and asked, "Do you see me as Votar sees Pluck?" "Do you want to know if I have romantic intentions for you? I had thought about how my position would increase by marrying the daughter of our king and the true Serviatrix, but beyond what our marriage would gain me in my standing... I have no such love for you as Votar has for the Woman." "Oh..." Tabitha replied. "Did you believe I had feelings for you as a female? If you thought such things, why have you been slowly pushing me out of your life?" "How do you mean?" "Whenever I speak of the servir... that vile Woman..." Gamemnon started to complain. "You shoot down everything I want to do with her. She is your slave and yet you treat her as—" "You are the one who wanted me to make her my servir. You thought you would be placing Alba at my feet and making her lower than myself but you have done something different." "Explain... You have now lost me." "Tell me what you believe a servir is." Gamemnon peered at Groth, her bodyguard, and then Gamemnon answered, "A servir is a life long servant that is not paid but is bound to their master or mistress. They pledge that their body is not their own and their body belongs to the one they are bound to. Their will becomes their mistress or master's will and they will serve them until their body is no more. A servir also loses their title as citizen." "I also had a belief that was all that was to it," she said. "Tell me what more is there to being a servir," Gamemnon demanded. Tabitha glanced at Groth, and then she said, "It is not my place to tell you what a servir truly is." "How will I know the truth if you will not tell me?" "You only need to gain permission from my father and King Malodor will explain what a servir truly is." "I should know what sort of position I have placed the vile Woman in if there is more to a servir than being a slave, but first... Tell me plainly why you treat the vile Woman as you do." "I told you to speak to my father first," Tabitha stated, and then she thought of something and asked, "Is Alba the reason you have—" "Let me answer, no, before you ask. My love seems to be for another, but I have ruined any chances of our union." "You speak of Kabal." Gamemnon answered, "I do." "You love Kabal and yet you have put the mission of placing me as the Serviatrix before her and your love for her. You will have a time winning her back." "I doubt I could ever

win her back. She holds onto grudges. Look at her and how she treats the Woman. Kabal's brother loves this vile Woman and Kabal still treats her with contempt." "If you are basing your chances with the Duchess of Shangra on how you see how she treats Alba, you might want to reassess your chances with her." "What do you mean?" he asked. "Even I have seen that Kabal doesn't hate Pluck. She has been trying very hard to convince Pluck that she still hates her, but I have seen things. There is something else... Alba's name actually came from Kabal. Did you know that Alba is Pluck's birth name?" "I did not, so you returned her name to her when you gave the vile Woman the name Alba. What I have learned today greatly concerns me. We have already been warned by the Immortal Egle to beware of the False One, and I intend to do more than beware of her." "I will give you this warning..." Tabitha spoke. "Alba is my servir. If you harm her or cause any harm to come to her, I will see to it that the wrath of both of my fathers comes upon you." "Your threat is well heard. Now that I know your position with the False One, what do you intend to do about Sabrina?" Tabitha growled, and then she muttered a few choice words under her breath. Gamemnon said, "I meant in her claim to be the true Serviatrix." "Oh... What do you think I should do?" "We should find out if there is a way to determine who is the true Serviatrix and then have a contest of sorts." Tabitha asked, "Do we need to find all of the prophecies about the Serviatrix first?" "I do not believe so. We only need to look at the prophecies we do have and then put forth the challenge. What I need to know from you is if the challenge comes down to a duel, are you willing to fight to the death to claim the title of Serviatrix?" "I am," Tabitha replied. "I won't let Sabrina claim the title for herself."

* * *

Votar's residence...

Bella found that she was sitting in the chair again as she usually did nals... sun's cycles on end. Kabal had thoughtfully brought her some broth, but she hadn't managed to eat any of it. The door to the room opened, and Kabal entered the dark area just outside of what light did come in the room. Bella spoke to her, "I am sorry, Kabal, but I haven't been able to eat any of the broth you brought me. I will try again later." Kabal stood at the entrance and seemed upset with her. "I know... I know... I should eat, but I find that I don't have much of an appetite." Kabal turned as if looking for someone. "Your brother isn't here. He still hasn't come and seen me since we arrived here. I don't know why Votar won't see me. We have been apart for so long and yet he does not come and see me." "Why are you sitting here in the dark?" a voice questioned her that Bella didn't recognize. "Who are you?" Bella asked as she panicked. The room seemed to close in on her as she questioned, "And why are you here? Have you come to take me back? I won't go back. I would sooner die than go back!" "Go back where?" the voice questioned her. "Go back to... Wait... You are not one of them. I really don't know who you are. Tell me your name or I will scream for the guards." The figure glanced around as if they were afraid of being found out by the guards, and then they said, "Who are you? I heard that the Duke of Shangra brought back someone while out on his journey." "I did come back with him, but I don't think I should tell you my name. I don't know who you are." The figure took a step toward her, and Bella threatened, "Come no closer or I will scream. Now tell me who you are!" "If you don't want to tell me your name, I will just leave," the figure told her, and then they turned to walk out. "No, don't go!" Bella called out to them. "Please stay." The figure paused and then asked, "Why would you want

me to stay when you were just about to call the guards on me?" "It gets lonely here. Kabal has come and seen me, but Votar has only ignored me." "You know Kabal." "You sound as if you have at least an acquaintance with her." The figure turned again to leave, and Bella called out, "Please don't go. Stay with me and talk to me. Tell me your name." "I won't tell you my name unless you tell me yours first." She thought about it, and then she answered, "I am Bella." The figure moved into the room and came to the light of the few candles, and then Bella saw who they were. This person seemed to have a darkness about them, a shadow of looming danger.

* * *

Pluck's residence...

Votar knocked at the door, and GuideMa answered it. "I would like to speak with Pluck." GuideMa told him, "It is about time you came. Come in." He followed her as GuideMa led them to a table, and then they both sat. The Femor glared at him for a while as they waited on Pluck. Votar didn't like the way GuideMa was staring at him as if she already knew what he had done to Pluck and who he had brought back into his life. Mites went by and finally, he had enough of her glaring and questioned, "Where is Pluck?" "She is not here. She actually went to your residence, so I thought I would hold you here until she realizes you are here and returns," GuideMa answered, and she questioned, "Would you like something to drink or eat? I am completely stuffed after Pluck's... well... never mind that. Would you like something?" "I am hungry. Maybe something to eat," Votar answered, and then a few moments later, he asked, "How long has Pluck been gone?" "Let me see," GuideMa said as she thought about it. "Well first, Sabrina showed up and then..."

* * *

Much earlier...

Pluck's residence...

"Hello..." Pluck replied as she answered the door. She found Sabrina standing in the hallway with no sign of her companions anywhere. "I didn't expect to see you here... especially by yourself. Is something wrong?" "Nothing is wrong," Sabrina replied with a hidden smirk. "I only wanted to do something for you. I hear that you have been trying to see the Duke of Shangra and he has barred you from seeing him." "Not exactly barred," Pluck said. "He more or less... I'm not sure what he has more or less done, but he hasn't barred me from seeing him." She muttered to herself, "Surely he hasn't." "I say it is about time that you talked with you duke and get right down to what is going on." Pluck asked, "What do you mean?" "There are many rumors floating around about the Duke of Shangra," Sabrina replied. "For your own piece of mind, you should find out the truth." "The truth about what?" Pluck asked as a feeling of worry she had not even entertained before Sabrina showed up began to plague her thoughts. "You know," Sabrina said, assuming the False One had heard by then. "About what he did." Pluck wasn't sure what she was talking about but decided she should talk to Votar since he hadn't come and seen her. She went back in and told GuideMa where she was going and told the Femor she would go on her own along with Sabrina. GuideMa gave her a look for going anywhere with Sabrina. Pluck reassured her by saying, "If it is a trap, I will be the only one killed and then you don't have to watch me

anymore.” GuideMa seemed to accept that answer, and Pluck went on with Sabrina to Votar’s residence. Pluck hurried through a hallway as she tried to keep up with Sabrina, and Pluck asked, “Why are you helping me?” “Helping you?” Sabrina spoke as if it was something foreign to her. She told Pluck, using the False One’s words from before, “I am doing this just to show you exactly what is in my mind and my heart.” Sabrina paused at a corner and peered around, eyeing the Duke of Shangra’s residence. “I will distract the guards and you will sneak in and meet with the Duke of Shangra.” “I don’t think I should sneak in,” Pluck said. “Votar should—” “I don’t believe your duke is going to do anything. If you want something done, you need to do it yourself.” Sabrina distracted the guards outside of the door to Votar’s residence as she promised, and Pluck just walked in. Of course, Sabrina had drawn both of her swords and charged the guards and then ran away from them to draw them away, but it still worked. “Votar,” Pluck called out as she entered, but she whispered it more than she yelled his name. She walked around the residence and went and knocked on the door but there didn’t seem to be anyone there besides her. Pluck continued through Votar’s residence and came to a door that was partly opened, so she walked in and stood just inside. The room was dark and there was something there sitting quietly in the dark as if they belonged there. The person sitting began to talk to her like she was Kabal. Pluck could tell by her voice that this person was a female. She continued to talk to her as if she was Kabal. Pluck thought she shouldn’t be there, so she turned to leave but instead she was drawn to ask a question. “Why are you sitting here in the dark?” Pluck inquired as if she should pity the one in the room. “Who are you?” the female asked in a voice that shouted she was afraid. “And why are you here? Have you come to take me back? I won’t go back. I would sooner die than go back!” Pluck considered what she said and the few words she had just spoken were clues to who this person was, so Pluck questioned, “Go back where?” “Go back to... Wait... You are not one of them. I really don’t know who you are. Tell me your name or I will scream for the guards.” Whoever this person was afraid of she could tell that Pluck wasn’t one of them. Was this another clue? Pluck glanced around as if Votar or Kabal or even one of the guards would come charging in. She thought about leaving again, but then she would learn nothing, so Pluck asked, “Who are you? I heard that the Duke of Shangra brought back someone while out on his journey.” “I did come back with him, but I don’t think I should tell you my name. I don’t know who you are.” Pluck noticed that she was standing in a dark spot and started to move to walk into the light of the candles, but the person threatened, “Come no closer or I will scream. Now tell me who you are!” She started to tell the female her name, but something held Pluck back. It was if this person wanted to gain some sort of power over her and she only needed her name to do so. “If you don’t want to tell me your name, I will just leave,” Pluck told her, and then she turned to walk out. “No, don’t go! Please stay.” Pluck paused and then asked, “Why would you want me to stay when you were just about to call the guards on me?” “It gets lonely here. Kabal has come and seen me, but Votar has only ignored me.” Another clue had been presented to Pluck. The female knew the Duchess somehow. Pluck said, “You know Kabal.” Bella heard familiarity in the usage of Kabal’s name. The figure didn’t say Duchess only Kabal so either this figure was rude and/or uneducated in etiquette or they knew her friend well enough to use only her given name. Bella said, “You sound as if you have at least an acquaintance with her.” Pluck turned again to leave, and Bella called out, “Please don’t go. Stay with me and talk to me. Tell me your name.” Pluck still had that feeling that this person wanted to gain something over her, so Pluck said, “I won’t tell you my name unless you tell me yours first.” “I am Bella.” Pluck moved

into the room and came into the light of the candles. Bella peered at her as if Pluck was some sort of dark creature who had come to devour her. She thought about retreating so not to frightened the female, but she was already there so she said, "I am Pluck." Bella looked over the female Necrom. Pluck seemed to have a darkness about her, a shadow of looming danger. The Shadow had touched her in some way. Bella noticed the choker that bound her to someone. Bella grinned as she said, "So... you are Pluck."

The End

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